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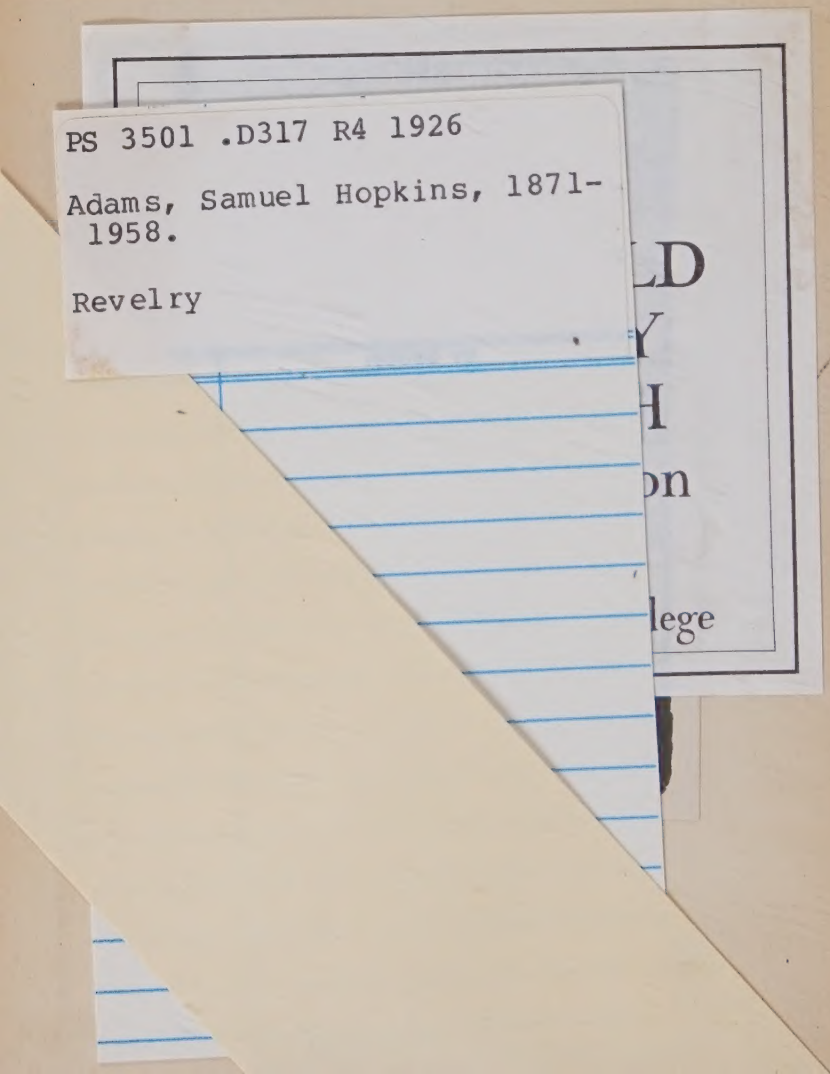
Revelry



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REVELRY

by

SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS

BONI & LIVERIGHT
New York 1926

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REVELRY

A NOVEL OF THE TIME JUST BEYOND OUR OWN DAY

CHAPTER I

LE ROI S'AMUSE ————

THE March air was still raw. It had chilled the perfume of a close cluster of lilacs, growing in the front angle of a house which stood only a yard from the sidewalk.

It was a prim, white, austere little house, oddly countrified in that busy thoroughfare. Its presence made a restful break in the jagged skyline of the changing Washington street. On one side of it a certified milk station bristled with assertive cleanliness; on the other, a laundry catered to the candescent linen of the Capital's highest officialdom. Opposite loomed a gaunt upthrust of lines and angles like an unsolved problem in geometry, which would presently become an office building. Among these crowding edifices the little house was overshadowed if not actually threatened. But it gave the impression of not caring at all. Defended by the cluster of bushes, it nestled secure as a woman in safe protection.

It had one distinctive peculiarity in that street. It slept by day and woke at night.

At half past ten of this late March evening it was already awake. Two green-lidded eyes on the ground floor rear testified to this. When a breeze sucked one of the drawn shades outward, slow wisps of smoke eddied through and were lost in the darkness. A rumble of thick laughter within reached the ears of a patrolling policeman. He slipped into the alley way bounding the backyard of the property and leaned upon the yellow-painted gate, pierced through a dense hedge. Beyond this hedge the rear entry sheltered even more privily than the front. The policeman listened and smiled wisely, tolerantly. He passed on.

Within the lighted room, had the officer cared to look, he would have seen four men seated under the flare of a cluster of central globes. All were coatless and at ease. Their talk was fitful, as the talk of an expectant group is prone to be, and was punctuated with inhalations of smoke, mastication of "dry" cigar ends, and the sleazy hiss of a syphon from the disorder of a marble-topped stand in the corner.

"Let's start something."

"Four's a punk game."

"It's all right for stud."

"Ah, let's wait for Bill."

"He won't care."

"No; of course he won't care. But it isn't eleven yet."

"What's he got on for to-night?"

"God knows! The usual bag o' tricks, I reckon."

"Gee! It's a rotten life."

"Yeah! A rotten life! You wouldn't trade with him, I s'pose."

"Show me the chance! Who wouldn't trade with him?"

"I wouldn't."

A short cackle around the table. "Tim says he wouldn't. That's a good one."

"Tim's a liar."

"Like hell, he wouldn't."

"Well, I wouldn't. Couldn't stand the pace. Look what it's doing to the Chief."

"To Bill? What's the matter with him?"

"Ten years older than he was a year ago and he'll be ten more next year; that's all. And he's a horse for work."

"How 'bout that li'l stud game?"

"Let's get some more air in here first."

"We won't get it after Bill comes, that's a cinch."

"Right. The Chief always says that when he's indoors he likes to *be* indoors."

"Well, that's reasonable enough—one way of looking at it."

"Say, you fellows don't think he's slipped up on us, do you?"

"Naw. Did you ever know him to?"

"Not if he could help it. But he maybe can't always help it."

"He'll make it or bust a leg. Why, he'd rather sit in this little game than go to dinner with the Prince of Wales. It's the most fun he gets outa life, I'll bet. . . . Well, Rastus?"

"Yassuh. Did any gemmun ring?"

"Yup. I did. The rye is getting low."

"Yassuh. I'll have it replenished dreckly. Plainty mo' in the cellah. . . . Jes' got a telephone, gemmun; good news telephone. He oughta be here any minute."

"Isn't that a car stopping now?"

The room bustled into activity. Some one swung the

center table which thereby revealed receptacles for chips and ashes. Another closed both windows. The aged negro set the marble stand to rights, while the crisp clicking of bone disks told of the final preparations for the Great American Pastime.

The rear door opened, a voice said backward, "Good night, boys," and the awaited member of the fellowship entered. All voices greeted him eagerly.

"Hello, Andy," he responded. . . . "Back again, Dan? Have a good trip?" . . . "Well, Henry; tuned up to win, this time?" . . . "Tim, boy, I'm glad to see you."

A change, instant and palpable, had been wrought by his arrival. Not only was the atmosphere vivified; it was warmed by the innate warmth of his personality, as any typically American group might responsively have been. He was a broad, sturdy, fair man, not more than forty-five or six, with moistly bright eyes, a loose, humorous mouth, a fine chin and forehead, a thick nose, and flat, florid cheeks prophetically indented with half-circles of the muddy lead-blue that tells of vitality-overtaxing excesses, quite as probably mental as physical. His hair rose with so noble a flourish above his brow as to temper the prevailing glossy good-fellow effect with a measure of superiority, almost of caste. His hands modified this impression. They were thick and quick, restless and small. He limped very slightly and was at some pains to conceal it.

An inside door swung, discovering a middle-aged woman, frail, dull-eyed, stupid looking. She was not stupid. She was discreet. Provenly so, or she would not have been in that place. She bowed gravely to the new arrival, and something painfully resembling a smile relieved the aridity of her countenance.

"Evening, Aunt Sue."

"Good evening, sir. Had a hard day?"

"No worse than usual. Got any mint?"

"Your glass is frosting right here, sir."

"Fine!" He took it gratefully from her hand. "Ah-h-h-h. That's a relief. These infernal dry dinners!" He brushed the powdered sugar from his nose. "Good for the nation, maybe, but hard on the system." When his face had emerged from the greenery of the julep a second time it was primed with a welcome announcement. "The day's best news is that Liscomb's through."

"*No!*"

"Is he?"

"Good business."

"So Andy has got his wish."

The man referred to ran his hand through his ill-distributed wisps of gray hair. "The dirty crook," he said with lingering satisfaction.

"No. Liscomb isn't a crook," corrected the bearer of the tidings. "But he wants to run too many jobs besides his own. Therefore—out. On account of ill-health, of course. The papers will have it to-morrow."

"A nosy bastard," commented the component of the circle known as Dan. He relinquished the mangled remains of a cigar which slithered down his shirt front, lodged for a moment in a fold of his bright galluses, and fell to the floor. His bulky leg, at the end of which a shoe of quite preposterous breadth splayed out, swung down from the arm of the chair where he had looped it. There was a meanish and well-refuted rumor in Washington that Dan Lurcock had once, in a buried and grass-grown past, been a detective. He

had been. That shoe was carried over from that past. Somehow his face was vaguely like the shoe.

"I've got to quit at one," stated Andy of the sparse hair.

"Make it two and 'phone her. She'll wait." From the bluff Lurcock.

"Marie in town?" This was the youngest member of the group. He was probably little more than thirty-five and spoke with the conscious bravado of his rather striking good looks.

"That's my business." But Mr. Anderson Gandy was not displeased.

"So long as the wiff ain't, it's all jake with Andy," comfortably proffered the man called Tim.

A smiling negligence had been the newcomer's attitude toward this light and graceful badinage. Now he drew up to the table and expertly filtered his chips. "Five hundred. Correct. What are we playing for? The usual?"

"Twenty-five limit. Double on roodles. Right?"

"Right is right."

All drew in to the green cover. Next to Bill on his left, Tim perspired gently in the smother of smoke which seemed almost at once to anesthetize him, for his fattish body sank into the curve of the chair, his eyes all but closed and he emerged from his coma only as a faint voice responding to the necessities of the game. His other neighbor, the handsome youth, provided a contrast. He was alert, unrestingly attentive, evidently impressed by his surroundings, and on his behavior. One would have correctly guessed him not only the youngest in years, but also in experience of the game and in membership in the group. His companions addressed him as "Forrest" or sometimes

"Duke," all but the leader who called him "Henry." To the latter he was deferential. Lurcock, at his elbow, was deferential to nobody; probably never had been. Completing the circle, Anderson Gandy drank beer and perseveringly drew to inside straights. Only those who believe in their luck and are justified of their faith do this.

Any one hundred per cent American would have recognized the group at sight, as bone-and-blood kindred. Men of substance, these, who had put aside for the easeful hour cares and responsibilities, formality and attitude, and now, comfortably their shirt-sleeved selves, sat in to their well-earned recreation. One could have recruited almost the same little game ("just for an hour or so to round out the evening") after a Chamber of Commerce banquet in any one of fifty cities. Just as one could have duplicated that room with all its accessories in a thousand communities, large and small, from Baton Rouge to Detroit, and from San Diego to Grand Street, Fifth Avenue, or Central Park West in the City of New York, even to the brisk, truncated formula of the game, which popped in the smoky quiet like running gunfire.

"Open for ten."

"Drop."

"I'm in."

"Make it twenty-five."

"Out."

"Boosted again."

"Hell!"

"String along."

"Stick."

"Cards?"

And so on.

At the end of the first hour Bill, playing on his defense, was losing steadily though not yet heavily. Lurcock stood about even. Gandy was comfortable behind a pile made up of the losses of the Chief, Tim Fosgate, and Henry Forrest. The latter had consumed a bottle of champagne which aided him to maintain the fixed smile of sportsmanship.

The atmosphere had thickened and fouled. There was a reek of language as well as of smoke; interjections of some short-bitten word, out of print since the spacious days when the Virgin Queen spoke her mind in terms interdicted to modern queens or even modern virgins. Terminatives had sloughed off from words; "you's" degenerated into "juh's" and "yah's"; the name of the Nazarene, foreshortened to a malignant hiss-and-crackle, mechanically expressed disgust or surprise. Between deals Bill inquired:

"Heard the one about the manicure and the frozen egg?"

"No." This with general anticipation. Bill invariably had a new and "good" one.

He told it. There was appreciative laughter. Even the morose Lurcock chuckled. The raconteur beamed genially on them. He repeated the "snapper" of the story. "I thought you fellows would like that one."

"Told it to Susie Sheldon yet?" asked Gandy with humorous intent.

"That great and good man"—Bill pursed his mobile lips—"would not, I fear, get the point."

"If he did, he'd faint away, the psalm-singin'——" Lurcock carried out the alliteration, also the hyphenization to its full four points. The epithet was smileless.

"Easy, Dan. Ee-eeeezy, boy," soothed Bill comically. "Remember who he is."

"Our revered and upright Secretary of State," said Forrest, making a lemonish mouth of it.

"Upright like a——" Gandy lacked time to complete his comparison, for Bill broke briskly in on him:

"This isn't poker, boys. Who deals?"

He reached back, while Lurcock was gathering the cards, and pulled a bottle toward him. Tim Fosgate woke up.

"Hey, Chief. That's Scotch."

"I know it. I didn't think it was buttermilk, Tim."

"Liqueur Scotch. Hot stuff."

"What of it?"

"Won't mix so good with rye, will it?" Beneath the casualness of the tone there was an affectionate solicitude.

"Oh, all right; all right! Where is the damn rye?" It was the first touch of petulance and he immediately smiled it away, asking, with a glance at the green cloth and then at his cards; "What does it cost me to edge you fellows outa this pot?"

"Cost you a hundred, so far."

"Fifty more." It was a roodle round.

Lurcock, Forrest, and Gandy stayed after Fosgate had dropped and lapsed into his habitual somnolence. Forrest took one card and threw his hand in with a resolute grin. Gandy drew one, Bill two, and Lurcock dealt himself two. At the first bet Gandy tossed in his cards. Bill raised. Lurcock raised. They eyed each other, challenging, estimating, appraising, war-seasoned opponents in many a former duel. Bill "allowed" that his hand was worth a further little invest-

ment of fifty rollers. There was nearly five hundred dollars in the pot.

"Prob'ly got me licked," said Lurcock resignedly. He pushed forward two yellow chips. "I call. What's the bad news?"

"Three ladies."

"'S good." He flipped his hand centerward. Two fives turned up; the other cards did not show. Forrest, a little drunk, stared at them with popping eyes.

"On the strength of which," announced Bill, rising, "I shall retire temporarily to the second turn on the left, where the little red light burns. Deal me out."

With the closing of the door Forrest said in an excited mutter: "Whadja drop that hand for?"

Lurcock eyed him. "He had me licked."

"He *did* not. You had a full house."

"Forget it."

"You did, I tell yuh. And you let him get away with it after you called."

"What of it?" The tone was truculent. Forrest blinked.

"You called him," he repeated weakly. "If you thought he had you——"

"What God-damn business is it of yours?"

"Well, I—I only——"

"If you can't play a gentleman's game——"

"Cut it, Dan." Fosgate had roused himself again and none too soon, for the big man looked combative. "We might as well put him wise if he's goin' to sit into this game." He continued in his conciliatory drawl, addressing himself to the culprit; "The Chief's a good loser. But he loves to win; see? It makes his day for him to draw down a little winnin' on the night's play.

So, if any friend of his wants to make it a little easy for him, why that's that."

"You mean—you mean you'd expect a fellow to lay down, even if——"

"Only in case he'd been runnin' in hard luck, like tonight," explained the other soothingly.

"Nobody's askin' *you* to do anything," growled Lurcock.

"If you did you're safe to make it up in other ways by sticking around, you know," contributed Gandy. "Besides, he needs the money more than we do."

This quite dumbfounded Forrest. "Are you trying to put it over on me that he's hard *up*?"

"He's under pretty heavy expense, running his part of the show. I hope I'll have more in the old sock at the end of the trick than he will," answered Gandy.

"You win," grinned Lurcock.

"Things haven't been breaking so well lately, though," complained the other. He directed a furtive glance toward the inner door. "Anything doing yet on that Northeastern Waterways business?"

Lurcock shook his head. Fosgate returned a sleepy negative.

"Isn't he going to loosen up?"

"Search *me*."

"Think it would be any use to try him out on it now?" queried Forrest.

"Aw, lay off him! Cancha give him a little rest?"

"Strikes me he's been tight with his information lately."

"Why wouldn't he be tight?" retorted Lurcock. "Some bastard smeared that last inside stuff all over the board." He bent his heavy gaze on the complainant. "They say your girl had it, Andy."

"Not me," was the hasty disclaimer.

"I think"—Fosgate's drowsy mutter seemed to emanate from the folds of his neck—"maybe we ain't careful enough about the Chief. There's a lot of things to consider."

"Sure there is. Including the next pot," agreed Gandy loudly, for he had heard returning footsteps. "Here you are, Bill. Welcome back. Get into this jacker for twenty-five."

The circle being reconstituted, they played on for twenty minutes. A busy stir in the adjacent room served as signal of interruption.

"Seventh inning. All stretch!" Bill stood up and spread his arms. His luck had turned. He was better than even now. The others followed suit.

A guffaw from outside rose above the stir. The door was hurled open and a largish, fattish, blondish, youngish man in evening clothes and a waistcoat of wildly fascinating design swaggered jovially in. The circle hailed him as genially though less affectionately than it had welcomed Bill.

"It's Cholly."

"Howsa boy?"

"Some dresser, ain't he?"

He returned the acclaim in a mellifluous bellow, and crossed the room to deliver a special greeting.

"Hello-ello, Bill! How's old Bill?"

"Fine, Charley. What's been holding you up?"

"Had a li'l date," returned the other coyly.

"Been out fussing 'em again, have you, Charley?" asked Gandy.

"You tell me and I'll tell you," answered the newcomer brightly. It was his favorite quip.

It failed, however, to find favor with Lurcock who demanded; "What does that stuff mean, anyway?"

"I dunno. It's just a line."

"Don't mean anything to me."

"That's all right too. Needn't get sore about it, Dan. It makes a hit with the ladies."

"How'd you come, Charley?" asked Bill with his pacificatory smile.

"Sig brought me. He's outside." The door swung again admitting a somewhat younger man of a beaming and vapid expression of countenance. "Introducing Mr. Sigmund McBride, the well-known multimillionaire—if you don't care how he got it."

Mr. McBride, who had got it by the respectable method of inheritance from a deceased father in the mail order business, came back with "Don't be so goldarn funny, Cholly." Adding, to the gathering, "Hello, you fellers. How goes the game?"

"Want in?" hospitably asked Fosgate.

"Can't do it. Just popped in to see if that last case of cham I sent around arrived all right. Gotta go on."

"I'll stay and feed," said Mr. Charles Madrigal, and turned to say a private and earnest word to Forrest.

The stupid looking woman brought in a platter of thick, beefy sandwiches. All had drinks with theirs, Bill a brandy highball. They talked baseball and prizefighting in food-muffled tones. Bill, who was a great admirer of the heavyweight title-holder, bewailed his inability to attend the forthcoming championship bout. "I've got a thousand to put on him," he said.

"Shall we go on?" asked Gandy whose velvet had been cut down sharply.

"If I don't show up at my desk at ten A.M.," mumbled Fosgate, "the United States Treasury is liable to get discouraged and go broke."

"If you do," laughed Bill, "the Secretary is likely to die of the shock. Let's play three rounds of roodles and a consolation and call it a day."

Against a whispered protest by Tim he had two more drinks during the continuation. The only effect seemed to be in a brightened eye and a more alert attention. Certainly no one could have identified the first evidences of intoxication. But the faithful Timothy Fosgate knew that drink, beyond a certain point, made the Chief obstinate. And you never could tell what form his obstinacy might take. The object of his solicitude announced, after raking in the consolation pot.

"Three seventy-eight to the good. Not so bad. . . . Well, home, sweet home."

"Car waiting?"

"Dunno. I'm walking. Need the air."

The others exchanged glances of doubt and anxiety. "I'll phone for my boat. Won't take five minutes." "Mine's just around the corner." "Better take——" "Lemme call——"

"Walk, I said," stated Bill firmly.

"All right. We'll all trail along."

"Don't want you."

"Bill, I need the exercise. Look at my straining vest buttons. Lemme pace you."

"Some other night, Charley. Run around your own block."

"I'm going your way, Chief."

"No, you aren't, Tim, boy."

"But, Chief——"

"I've got a little hunch for my own society this evening," he explained. He laughed at the concerned faces. "Forget it, boys. Nobody's going to eat me. I can look after myself. Been doing it for forty-six years. And if anybody thinks I'm the least pickled——"

"No, no, Bill." "Of course not." "It isn't that, Chief, but——"

"No 'but' about it. I'm on my way and nobody follows. Get that? All right. Good night, boys. Friday, as usual?"

"Sure." "We'll be here." "I've got to get back some of that dough." "Good night, Bill."

He went out, not as he had entered but through the inner hallway. They heard the front door close.

"Gee!" said Forrest, and stared at the others.

"Oh, he'll be all right," asserted Lurcock.

"Sure, he'll be all right," from Madrigal.

"Of course," muttered Gandy. "But if anything should——"

"What could happen?" put in Tim Fosgate with the urgency of self-argument.

"It's only five squares."

"But it's after two o'clock. I dunno as we ought to——"

"How yuh goin' to stop him?"

"That's right, too. Still——"

"He's done it before. Lotsa times."

"Yes; but not since——"

"No. It's different now."

"Oh, well," said Gandy. "Nothing'll happen."

"No," echoed Forrest, "nothing'll happen."

"Of course it won't," Tim Fosgate's voice fortified the assurance.

Lurcock heaved his bulk out of the chair and crashed his fist down upon the table. "No; nothin'll happen: nothing'll happen," he parroted raucously. "But s'posin' it *should* happen? Jesus Christ; he's President of the United States, ain't he!"

CHAPTER II

TRUANCY

After his escape, Willis Markham, President of the United States, stepped along briskly. Haste was advisable. In spite of his prohibition the boys would at once notify the secret service men in the backyard whose legal responsibility it was to tag after him everywhere he went. Dirty trick to give his guards the slip. They were nice fellows, too, splendid fellows; but he was dead sick of their constant surveillance, of never being able to be alone with his own thoughts unless he went to bed to gain that end.

Roseate thoughts they were, now. The quickened blood of his flight had worked the drink in him to dreams and visions. Willis Markham beheld the single and glorious figure of himself against a stupendous background of circumstance, mounting, mounting, surmounting. It was an incredible and heroic progress. Lucky, too: he had to admit it. Sometimes his good fortune almost frightened him. Who was it the stars in their courses had fought for? Cicero, wasn't it? He had made a hit with that reference in an address last week. Those classical sort of things gave finish to a speech. Carpenter had a neat turn for running 'em in when he got up a speech; mighty useful assistant secretary, Carpenter: a swell, highbrow education, too. Come to remember, though, the stars in their courses fought against Cicero; not

for him. Cicero didn't sound quite right either. Maybe it was Syph—no, Sisyphus. He giggled at the near-slip. Suppose he had sprung that in a speech! Anyway, the stars in their courses weren't fighting against Willis Markham. They were friendly stars in a friendly universe. Old Bill's friends. He looked up, caught the ray of the largest world overhead and winked at it. Pals, eh, old twinkler?

What pals he had had! How they had stuck by him! Well, why not, by God? He'd stuck by them, hadn't he? They had come along with him, every step, sharing his splendid fortunes. And now here they were in Washington, all together, enjoying the fruits of victory. They were "his gang"; the boys: glorious fellows. A man could forget his troubles and have a good time with them. If it wasn't for those good times, for the fellowship and the release of the "whist parties," he believed he would have cracked before now under the strain of being President. There was criticism of his chosen associates; he knew that. Let 'em yelp. That was the price of success. There was always a bunch of soreheads, purity howlers, sniffing around for crookedness as soon as a man got ahead. Well, they never pinned anything on him. He'd had a good time, too, all the way, in spite of the toil and the anxiety and the weight to carry. Plenty of fun. But nothing rough; nothing to make the church folks sore; no debauchery, no scandal, no women, not any woman that counted. . . .

His wife, poor Sara Belle! She had seen him into the White House, and then broken. A nervous wreck, now. Not insane. He wouldn't have it that she was insane, she whose eager, insistent mind and dominating will had been such a force in his life. But the

experts, the best in the world, no expense spared, would undertake no prophecy as to when she might be released from that mountain retreat where she was now planning a holy war to make him Emperor of the World. Privately he didn't believe she'd ever—— Well, thank God, he'd always been good to her! Not many men would have stood those years of nagging. Still, fair is fair: without it would he ever have got where he was? She and Dan Lurcock, pulling together, for him. Well, she had had her hour of glory. The First Lady of the Land. Sara Belle! Some jump!

The angry buzz of a car at high speed alarmed him. The secret service men, probably. Who else, at that hour? Scouting after him. Panic took possession of him, an enjoyable, impish panic. He dodged into a yard, ran, crouching, along a side-path, and huddled upon a bench in the rear garden, alert and chuckling like a truant boy. The chase passed, taking the corner with a yell of protesting brakes.

The fugitive's mood changed and darkened. Drink does things like that to a man. At one pulse-beat it sends waves of splendor through the responsive nerves; at the next it turns the blood sour. A hell of a world, Willis Markham now clearly perceived it to be. This business of being President! Pulled and hauled and pecked at, this way and that, by a thousand petty demands; called upon for instant and risky decisions on a hundred different points; expected to be a judge, an executive, an arbiter, an international expert, a party leader, a graceful speechifier, a pacificator of dissensions, a pathfinder of policies, an adjuster of irreconcilable interests, a tireless physical mechanism at the call of an army bristling with demands like spears.

Take to-morrow. What a day! There would be eight hundred to a thousand letters, fifty of them, at least, important enough to call for reading and personal answer: maybe a hundred of them. Floor leader of the House at 10:45 for consultation. Why weren't those fellows up to their jobs? That Coast Senator with his interminable howls about the Japs. What was the matter with the Japs? Very nice fellows, he'd always found them. Well, that wouldn't take long. But Sheldon would: "Susie" Sheldon, Secretary of State with his old-maid preciseness, his prissy conscientiousness, his effect of carrying all the virtue and responsibility and knowledge in the world in that black brief-case of his, without which he never undertook official business. Brief-case? Grief-case: that's what it was.

What kind of grief would pop out of it to-morrow—no, to-day, to harass him? Plenty: that was sure. European complications: "The peace and prosperity of Europe, Mr. President, must be as much our concern——" What the hell did he, Bill Markham, know about the debt of Juggo-Slobbia or whatever it was? That was Sheldon's business. What did he think he was Secretary of State for? Anyway, Susie gave him a pain. He never saw that smugly framed face without an unholy desire to blat into it a single schoolboy monosyllable, very vulgar and soul-satisfying, and gloat upon the spasm of agonized amazement that would surely follow. . . . After Sheldon, Welling. What did that blatherskite of a prairie-dog insurgent want? Some sort of trick, likely. Wouldn't trust that son-of—Delegation from W. C. T. U.; that was to-morrow. Two, wasn't it? He'd have to watch his

step with them. Nothing on the breath. They'd try to get him to commit himself and then maybe quote him. He'd need his wits about him. . . . Appointment of Federal Judge in that New England district. Did Lurcock give him the memo on that? . . . Three or four hundred commissions to sign. Tough on the old right hand. Corner-stone laying; that was afternoon. Delegation of foreign scientists. Speech of welcome? Yes. Oh, *Lord!* Committee from U. S. Chamber of Commerce. No speech there. Handshakers. Delegation from Order of Moose. Delegation with invitation from International Educational Union. Delegation from— God Almighty! How could a fellow do it all? Probably he'd have a headache, too. That liquor of Forrest's; probably all right. Forrest ought to handle good stuff if any one did. He'd been bootlegger to the Senate and the Cabinet long enough.

A car! Slowing up in front. Stopping. That wouldn't do. President of the United States found in a private garden at three A. M.; how would that look in the newspapers? But of course it would never get into the newspapers. They didn't print personal stuff, scandal stuff, about the President. The newspaper boys were friends of his, too. Good fellows. Glorious fellows. No; the worst that could happen was that he might be overtaken by the presidential guards, and he had now made it a point of honor, part of the game, that he should reach the White House ahead of the hounds. Stealthily he left his bench and moved backward into the shadow of the garden. A rear fence loomed. He estimated it. High, but not too high. The old muscles might be out of practice, but they were still serviceable. A rush, a scramble, terrifyingly

noisy, and he was over and on his knees in an alley, illumined by the glare of an approaching car.

He twisted himself aside, recoiled from the further wall, and went down.

"They can't keep *this* out of the papers," was his first dizzy thought of imminent death.

It was not, however, death. Dead men do not sit up and look with fascinated interest into a small, dark, metallic, unwavering hole. Willis Markham heard himself say; "Is that thing loaded?" He had the impression, though without exact memory, of having said it several times before. Now for the first time he got his answer.

"It is."

"It's a woman!" he said in amazement.

"Yes."

"Why should you want to shoot me?" he inquired, and began to laugh, though he was scandalized at the idea.

"I don't—particularly." He was blinded to her in the glare of the light behind which she stood with only the steady arm holding the pistol advanced, visible. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so. And I don't want to be."

"Then why do you jump back fences at this time of night?"

"I was running away," he explained.

"From the police?"

"From a party."

"Really!" She seemed amused. "Sorry to have interfered." The cold little mouth of the pistol drooped and vanished. Markham laid hold on the fender which loomed above him and drew himself to his feet, but staggered when he tried to stand alone.

"You *are* hurt. Get in and I'll take you along."

"Where?"

"Wherever you want to go."

"I don't specially want to go anywhere."

"Perhaps the hospital——"

"Not me."

"Home, then."

"Worse still," he chuckled.

"Is it because you don't consider yourself in a state to go home?" she surmised not unsympathetically.

"I'd be all right if I could get a drink."

"I've seen you before, haven't I?" she asked abruptly.

Well, he had been expecting recognition. But, playing for every chance, he replied; "Not likely. I don't live here."

"Then I'm mistaken. Can you get into the car?"

"I think so."

With her help he made it.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To my home until you are feeling better."

"Fair enough. Is it far?"

"At the end of this alley way, if you don't mind the rear entrance."

("A servant" he thought and instantly dismissed it. Not with that voice and manner. A governess, then, out on the loose? No; that didn't fit the confidence and poise of her bearing. She drove the car, too, as if it were her own and it was the most expensive car known to American luxury. But, a girl of her age—for the smooth, delicious voice told him that she was young—out at that hour of the night, and alone! The inference was obvious to his simple and unconscious cynicism. He wondered who the proprietor might be.

Careless proprietor to leave such a valuable and exquisite belonging thus unguarded.)

"I won't mind anything if I can get that drink," he answered.

"You can." The car came to a stop next to a wall, the door to which she opened. She led him up a flower-bordered pathway to a side entry and admitted him.

"Lie down there." He could barely see the divan upon which he lapsed gratefully. From outside she switched on a light, by which he caught sight of his face in a mirror and realized why she had not identified him. It was mud-smeared almost beyond recognition. There was a smart shattering of ice and her voice said; "You'll find a wash-room on the right."

Cannily he replied; "Perhaps I'd better leave my face as it is till the doctor sees it."

"As you wish." She entered. "I thought brandy would be the best thing for you."

"Thanks. Here's looking at you." He did look at her and marveled. She was not a girl, but a woman of perhaps thirty, such a woman as he had not before encountered. His brain buzzed about her like a bee about an unknown flower. He drank and gazed, and drank again; then; "Can I phone?"

"Shan't I get the number for you?"

"Thanks. Shoreham 5799."

There was delay with Central, giving him opportunity to indulge his curiosity and wonder about her. In all his vocabulary, which was large, ornate, and invariably equal to the political demands upon it, he could find no word to fit her. Beauty was insufficient. Elegance, too, though both went part way. Then he found it and was charmed with his success. *Serenity;* there was a physical serenity about her. Her face had

that atmosphere of remote loveliness that rivers and mountains possess. Her body had a way of falling into quiet, untroubled poses. One could hardly believe of it that it ever had or ever could know pain, passion, the desires and demands of feverous, striving humanity. It seemed ageless, untouchable, almost impersonal, like—like——

A clock struck three, recalling him from his unwonted flight of romanticism. Getting poetical, was he, in his old age! And about a woman who knocked around town alone late at night in a swell car, wore expensive jewelry and Paris (he surmised) clothes, lived in a millionaire house. Somebody's girl. Some Senator's, or the property of one of those quickly rich hangers-on of politics who had recently invaded Washington. He ran over in his mind those wearers of the toga rich enough to keep this style of woman. Not many, though it might be——

"Here is your number. . . . Just a moment." She carried the apparatus on its extension cord to him and turned to leave him alone.

"Don't go."

She inclined her head and sat down in a tall chair. He said into the mouthpiece; "Tim? . . . Of course I'm all right. . . . Come for me, will you? In a taxi."

"Twenty-seven Marquette Circle," she supplied.

He repeated the number. "Yes. A gi—A lady . . . *No!* . . . All right. G'by." . . . "A friend will be here for me in ten minutes," he informed her.

"Will you have some more brandy?"

"No, thanks."

"Wouldn't you be better lying down?"

"I'm all right. Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

She smiled faintly. "Not entirely," thereby confirming his belief. And yet——?

Abruptly he asked; "Who did you think I was when I landed in front of your car?"

"I hadn't so much time to think, you know."

"Weren't you scared?"

"No."

He laughed aloud in wondering delight of her. "I bet you weren't! Some fellow in Washington is lucky in having you."

Without change of expression she said: "You think me *une femme entrentenue?*"

"I don't understand French, if that's what you're talking."

"Really?" She seemed faintly surprised. Or was it faintly amused? He did not like her tone. "Then you're not in the diplomatic service?"

"No." He was flattered now. He would have liked to resemble a diplomat, a British one preferably, like Sir Wyndham Arden, the First Secretary. "Did you think I was?"

"I don't know that I thought anything. I'm afraid I'm not very imaginative or curious."

Rebuke? He was not sure. If it were, he would meet it direct. "I am," he retorted. "I wish I was going to see you again."

"Perhaps you will."

"Well, I—I'd like to," he said lamely. "Under the circumstances, it's awkward."

"People are awkward, not circumstances," she observed; and by her tranquil utterance of it, the statement took on the force of an immutable social law.

He perceived that nothing would be awkward for her: she would not allow it to be. Was that because she was outside the social pale? Or above it? Could a woman be both?

"I see what you mean," he assured her. (But did he?) "Just the same there are complications."

"Perhaps you mean that you are married."

"Huh?" he said startled. "Oh, that! Ye-es. That isn't what was wor—what I was thinking about."

"No? Still, it might have its importance—for you."

Now, what did she mean by that? That it didn't matter to her? All to the good, so far. Only, he was sure she was laughing at him. Why?

The doorbell rang.

"Good night, Miss—Mrs.——?"

"Good night." She did not offer her hand. Nor did she supply the hoped-for name.

"I'm ever so much obliged to you."

"What less could I do, after running you down? I hope you'll be none the worse for it."

She opened the door, herself. A stubby man, his commonplace features strained with anxiety, entered, gave her a quick glance, and said:

"All right, Chief?"

"All right."

"Good night," said the guest again.

"Good night." The door closed.

In the taxi there was silence. A moment before it turned from the avenue toward the house with the tobacco-juiced pavement, Willis Markham said:

"Who is she, Tim? Do you know?"

"Nope. I can find out."

The other said with a sigh: "Maybe you'd better not."

"That goes."

In his bed at the White House, Willis Markham pondered a curious thing. He lived by being President: reveled in it; gloried in it. Yet throughout the half hour spent with that strange girl he had been almost oblivious to his great position. And it had actually been a relief, a rest, a refreshment.

Well, what—as he fell asleep—do you know about that!

CHAPTER III

A LESSON IN POLITICS

BRAVING the season Monsieur Georges Jarry had set a small group of tables on what he was pleased to call his "terrasse." His temerity was justified on this soft-hearted spring noon. Two hardy patrons, arriving at his small, exquisite, and absurdly expensive restaurant at the angle of the pointed corner, had elected to lunch in the open. Everybody in Washington knew Senator Thorne; knew all about him, in fact, though none could prove what was common knowledge. He was tall, white, charming, scholarly, corrupt, and influential; urbane without kindliness, cynical without acidity of spirit. Everybody who was anybody knew also Edith Westervelt, brief though her inhabitation of Washington had been, but knew little about her. She was unique; that was generally agreed. And her variance from type was comprised mainly in a still indifference, impenetrable, inexorable, and apparent only to those who sought to penetrate beneath the smooth and serene exterior. Whether or not she was beautiful was a popular and often acrimonious topic of debate. She came to Washington, trailing the clouds of a singular European prestige. She had been a silly-season sensation in London and the unimpeachable and quietly disdainful heroine of a duel in Vienna in which near-royal blood might have been shed—if any had been

shed. She was the kind of woman who is inevitably discussed and ignores being discussed.

"Just drifting," she was saying in reply to some query of her companion's. "I saw a house that I like so I bought it."

"It's a permanent thing, then."

"Unless I get bored."

"Which you always do, don't you?"

"Don't we all, some time or other? I'm like the man who could resist everything but temptation. I can endure anything but environment. And if you, my oldest friend, disapprove——"

"Disapprove? My dear Edith! Apart from my notorious devotion of years, Washington is flattered and official society enriched by the presence of the young and lovely Comtesse d'Aillys."

"Leave the beautiful language and the title to the society reporters, Peter."

"You have definitely resumed your maiden name?"

"Yes."

"Would it be indiscreet in an old friend to ask——"

"Highly. Therefore I'll tell you before you ask. My husband was too good for me."

"But——"

"No self-respecting woman can endure to live with a man who is too good for her."

"Too good in his own opinion, or in yours?"

"Oh, mine! He considers that I am too good for him—or any man."

"Washington," he observed, "usually means politics."

"For a woman?"

"Politics or society. It can't be the latter for you. You've no more worlds to conquer. But in politics, with your power of influencing men—you won't deny,

I suppose, that you have a certain interest for men and that they stay interested?"

"Because they don't understand me."

"*Omne ignotum pro magnifica.*"

"Thanks for changing the gender."

"As I was about to say, you could stir up such a perfectly incredible and delightful mess here."

"Thanks again for the subtle flattery."

He sighed. "You're a hard habit to get over, my dear. I've never been able to, after all these years. I hope you don't mind."

"No. I like it."

"Really? I wonder why."

"I'm a woman, after all."

"It almost requires proof."

"I think I've proved it once," she answered, her voice stilled, her eyes distant.

He nodded gravely as over a confidence renewed.

"Should I prove anything," she added more lightly, "by going into politics?"

"Quite possibly. There is an opportunity here for a woman of brains and charm and breeding to become a real power if she played her cards right."

"Which usually means sex. I don't play that game, Peter. . . . What on earth is that fearful bellowing, up the street?"

Turning in his seat, the Senator took off his glasses to peer at a bow window midway of the block, in which sat a gross, pulpy, jovial, shirt-sleeved figure, his feet cocked up on the sill, his absurdly small mouth distorted around a fat cigar, giving him the appearance of a fish learning to smoke. At frequent intervals a jet of stained saliva shot forth to burst like a miniature bomb and bespatter the pavement: at spaces little

less frequent, a greeting to some passing Tim or Phil or Harry smote the air with a clamor startlingly incommensurate with its source.

"That," pronounced Senator Thorne, "is Jeff Sims."

"A person of wide acquaintance, apparently."

"If I passed there you would hear him bellow, 'Hello, Pete! Hear about——' "

"Do you know him so intimately?"

"He knows *me* so intimately. He knows every one so intimately. He is an important person."

"In what possible way?"

"Through being the friend of greatness."

"That loathsome creature? Perhaps his looks belie him."

"Not in the least. He is exactly what he appears; a huge, soft, blustering, good natured, innocent—" He paused, and confirmed his own words— "Yes, innocent moron. I doubt if he realizes even how crooked he is."

"Where does he get his power?"

"From close association with Daniel Lurcock."

She shook her tawny-gleaming head. "That means nothing, either."

"Saints preserve us! Not know of Lurcock? He is the active Attorney-General of the United States of America."

"I thought I knew the Attorney-General. What is his name? Hamline, Hamburg——"

"Hambidge. He's a nonentity. A dried leaf, with scarcely enough vitality to rustle. I spoke of Lurcock as the active Attorney-General. I should have said 'actual.' He has his desk at the Department of Justice, though he holds no official position, and gives the orders for the Hon. Morse Hambidge to carry out.

And Hambidge carries them out. Oh, yes! He carries them out. Otherwise he would be carried out, himself, on a shutter."

"But I don't see. Where does his authority come from and how is it connected with that dreadful ruffian in the window?"

"As to the latter, because they live together, and are the Damon and Pythias of Federal graft. As to the first item of your question, you may have perhaps heard, for all your justified indifference to your country's politics, of the Hon. Willis Markham, at present gracing an office of some importance."

"Sardonicism isn't becoming to the Senatorial mānner," she retorted. "If you mean the President——"

"Precisely. Well, Dan Lurcock invented him."

"Am I supposed to understand that?"

"You're supposed to understand anything that you set your mind to. Some day I'll tell you the story. The general belief in Washington is that Lurcock is the President's mouthpiece. It is not mine."

"What is?"

"Can you keep a treasonable secret?"

"I can keep any secret."

"I know you can, oh, more than woman! My belief is that the President is Lurcock's mouthpiece."

"Is the President such a weakling, then? He wouldn't strike one as being."

"Do you know our Willis?" he asked, surprised.

"I've seen him," she answered evasively.

"It isn't weakness. It's—well, gratitude. Lurcock made him and he gives Lurcock a free hand in the management of things."

"But I thought he had such a strong Cabinet."

"Oh, the official lot. It's a streaky cut of bacon,

the Cabinet. They go through their little mechanical processes well enough. But the real core and center of government from a practical standpoint is in that neat little house down there."

Her clearly marked brows went up. "Oh! Is that the house where the poker circle meets? You see I'm not entirely impervious to gossip."

"Then you should know," said he severely, "that in well-posted circles these gatherings are known as 'whist parties.' Yes, at night the Crow's Nest is sacred to the chaste revelry of card and chip. By day, it is severely business. There the real Cabinet meets and does a profitable trade: Secretary of Deals, Secretary of Pardons, Bootlegger General, Secretary of Office Sales, Secretary of Judicial Bargains, Receiver General of Graft, Secretary of Purchasable Contracts, Secretary of Public Health and Private Wealth—he's the worst of the roost—Chief Dispenser of Jobs; you'll find them all there at one time or another. *And* the actual Attorney-General, Dan Lurcock."

"Does the President stand for all this?"

"They're his friends. Old Bill Markham's friends can do no wrong. If you ever want a quiet job put through and have the price to pay for it, just call up Shoreham 5799."

"Thank you for—what was that number?"

"Shoreham 5799."

"I've already called it up."

Habitude of politics had taught Peter Thorne command of voice and expression. But his surprise was too much for his control. "You? For Heaven's sake, what about?"

"It was rather a queer adventure."

"It would be." The twist of his eyes toward the house was significant.

"Yes. I ran a man down night before last in the alley that I sometimes take as a short cut home. I think he had been drinking."

"Sure to have been."

"What?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"His face was muddied to a mask. But he did not seem to mind. Funny, don't you think?"

"Not so funny, perhaps."

"It seemed so to me. After I got home——"

"Oh! You took him home."

"Yes, my home. I had to take him somewhere and he protested quite violently at the suggestion of the hospital."

"Quite so."

"That is the third time you have commented in that cryptic way of yours."

"Is it cryptic to agree with your very interesting statements?"

"It is. Extremely."

"I beg your pardon, my dear. Go on."

"He asked me to call up Shoreham 5799."

"Whom did you get there?"

"I have no idea. As soon as I got the number, he took the phone and I paid no further attention."

"You wou— I beg your pardon."

"Then some one came for him in a taxi and took him away."

"Did you see the man?"

"Yes."

"A hulky, gruff, fair-haired man with a hard blue eye?"

"Not at all."

"Tall and spare, then? Diaconal suavity?"

"Wrong again. A small man. Quiet. Frightened but calm. Sleeky hair and eyes like a friendly seal."

"Fosgate. Did he say anything in particular?"

"Yes. He said, 'Is he hurt?' Quite anxiously."

"I don't mean Fosgate. I mean the other man."

"He chatted inconsequently. He seemed a restless soul. There was quite fifteen minutes to wait."

"Too long a space for weather talk to cover?"

"We didn't touch on the weather. He tried to explain what he was doing in that rear yard, but it was too blurry for me. Playing the gay Lothario, do you think?"

"A natural suspicion. But didn't it occur to you that he might be indulging a natural taste for solitude?"

"No. I can't say it did. I knew there was something queer about it, so I just chattered away to put him at his ease."

"He must have wondered at his hostess."

"Oh, he did! He hinted about to get a clue to my guilty luxury. He obviously suspected some Senator. What a slur upon your once respectable organization."

"He thought—*you!* Well, I'll——" Peter Thorne laughed, but there was an angry note in his mirth. "He must have been a dreadful ruin when you got through enlightening him."

"But I didn't. I was flattered."

"Flattered at being assigned to the demi-monde?"

"The haute demi-monde at least. The hall-mark of the Senatorial little ladies, I'm told, is their extreme youth. To have so high a market value set on one is surely complimentary to a woman who will never see thirty again."

"Yet you obstinately continue to look ten years younger. It's hardly decent."

"He rather hinted that he would like to call again if he could manage it."

"And you said?"

"Not at three A. M."

"Did that enlighten him?"

"I doubt it."

"You don't intend seeing him again."

"Don't I?"

"If you're asking me——"

"I'm not, I'm asking myself."

"In any case, I doubt if you will."

"A challenge?"

"Heaven forbid! I don't want to drive you to it. Is that the end of your very interesting narrative?"

"Practically. He bade me good night, and left my slandered precincts"—her soft lips quivered a little at the corner—"the best be-fooled man in Washington."

"About you, you mean?"

"About himself."

"You'll have to be more explicit with a failing intellect like mine."

"He never for an instant suspected that I knew who he was all along," she stated with delicate deliberation.

Without his volition, indeed to his disgust, Senator Thorne's hand extended towards his demi-tasse, jerked so sharply that the cup was knocked to the ground and shattered. "Clumsy of me! But it's wholly your fault." He reproached her with a slowly shaken head. "Edith, you're a sad disappointment to me."

"Because of my innocent little coup de theatre?"

"I wanted to be the one to surprise you. And now look at the coffee spots on my newest spring trouserings!"

"I've never seen you startled into a spasm before. I quite liked it."

"There will be no encore, however. Have there been any sequelæ to your adventure?"

"Sequels? What would there be? From the President?"

"More probably from some of those interested in him."

"No. Not that I recall. Wait! What was the name you mentioned? The actual Attorney-General, you called him?"

"Lurcock."

"Yes. A Mr. Lurcock called up yesterday. Several times."

"I don't like that, Edith."

"I didn't answer, of course."

"No, but——"

"But what?"

"I don't want to frighten you."

"Try and do it."

"He can make matters quite unpleasant for you."

"Can he?" she returned disdainfully. "I don't quite see how."

"Have you ever heard of the secret service?"

"It looks after counterfeiters and smugglers, doesn't it?"

"It is the official spy system of Washington. Under the present administration this government is a government by spies. Last week my office was rifled, and my private papers gone over."

"Why?"

"That's quite another story. There are rumors of a Senatorial investigation of certain activities, and though as a good administration man I'm against it, even I am not free from the espionage."

"But you are a United States Senator. I'm a private person."

"Not if the President of the United States comes to see you."

"Peter, you're becoming interesting."

"I don't want to interest you, my dear," said he gravely. "I want to warn you."

"You give me all the thrills of conspiracy. I could even imagine that the man exercising the wolfhound on the sidewalk opposite is a secret service man."

"He is."

"No! Trailing you?"

"Not at all. You."

She laughed. "I'll promise him a chase."

"You'll never get away from them. They've got a network about Washington. Even the President can't escape them."

"They spy on him?" she cried.

"Oh, no! Guard him. He gets dreadfully bored with it and tries to give them the slip once in awhile. He was escaping from them when you ran him down."

"Oh, that was it. Not the Lothario business. I'm glad. But how do you know so much?"

"I have my lines. One must have. However, all Washington is ringing with the brief nocturnal disappearance of our Bill: but very few of us know where he was. It is desirable, I think, that no more be informed. You have the gift of reticence, I know."

"As, for example, to-day."

"Oh, with me!"

"It's a temptation, though."

"What is?"

"The opportunity to see the inside of politics. Especially if it's as melodramatic as you make it appear."

"I am not exaggerating when I tell you that it may be dangerous."

"Tempting me still further!"

"Edith, I have heard on impeccable authority that you might have exerted a powerful and intimate—very intimate—influence on the inside diplomacy of a great European power."

"The price was too high. Intimate, by the way, is the exact word."

"Yes. Well, you cannot take part in this game without paying the price."

"It might almost be worth it."

He threw up his hands. "I give you up. Thank God I still have enough power to get you out of most forms of trouble. Will you remember that?"

"Yes, Petah, dear."

"By the way, when you get home, go quietly to one of your upper windows and see if you don't notice a man, or possibly two men, unobtrusively making the rounds of the circle, always where they can keep your house in sight."

They rose. Down the street the great voice of Jeff Sims fog-horned a message to a passing acquaintance.

"Hey, Alec! D'ja know that Stickley is out? . . . Sure! Quit for the good of his health."

The wolfhound leader watched the Senator and his companion pick up a car, then vanished into a house to telephone.

Three hours later Edith Westervelt called up Thorne.

"The men are there. Two of them."

"Of course. I wouldn't say any more now."

"Why not?"

"Your wires are probably tapped."

"I don't believe it! . . . Well, I'll write."

"Do, remembering always that your letters may be opened and read."

"Isn't there a line somewhere," said Edith Westervelt's voice, "about America being the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

CHAPTER IV

"WITH THE CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED"

THE Markham administration was at full speed ahead. On the Hill grave and laborious Senators debated; hard-working Congressmen maneuvered their political advantages; committees met and wrangled, experimented, revised, destroyed, recast, dissolved. Those sepulchral architectures which house the departments buzzed with the toil of heavily assistanted Secretaries, solving or muddling vital problems of finance, industry, commerce, transportation, law, diplomacy, and whether the new postmistress at Pinfeather, Oklahoma, should be removed for compromising the party in that she had bobbed her hair and attended a tea where rum was served. Up at the White House a happy, prosperous, overworked puppet smiled and radiated good fellowship and was all that a happy, prosperous, overworked nation expected him to be.

But in that unpretentious residence on Blue Street known as the Crow's Nest, the real business of governing the United States of America was conducted on a sound, dividend-paying basis. There, at the noon hour, Daniel Lurcock was taking his ease in his house. About him, deferential, assiduous and affectionate Jeff Sims fluttered like a corpulent and serviceable butterfly, getting out his favorite cigars, looking to it that the light did not too harshly afflict his tired eyes, that there was a pleasant draft of air upon his rugged fore-

head, and presently setting at his elbow a tall drink, prepared with his own hands. For Dan Lurcock, though quite jobless, was one of the hardest-worked men in Washington, and his unofficial office at the Department of Justice a center of quiet but purposeful activity. It was known (to the elect) that he transferred much of the heat and burden of the official day from the skimpy shoulders of the Attorney-General to his own broad ones; and this out of the greatness of his heart, for nowhere upon the departmental payrolls did his name appear.

After taking a long pull at his drink, the proprietor of the mansion selected a cigar from the box which his henchman pushed toward him, chewed it to a brush-end, and with a heavy sigh proceeded to the business of the day.

"Hear anything from Van Sittart?"

"Yep. His manager was over."

"Who saw him?"

"The Duke."

"Did he come through?"

"No. He claims it's too high."

"What!" growled the other. "A federal district attorneyship, with all those Volstead indictments to cash in on? Why, he can clean up a fortune in two years."

"Well, I dunno. Guess he's scared. Haley phoned."

"About the pardon?"

"Yeah. I steered him off. He'll go to fifteen thou'."

"Nothin' stirring," said the other with regret.

"Huh? Ain't it good enough?"

"The price is right, but it'd kick up too much of a stink. There's a Congressional election coming on down there. We got to think of the Party."

"Sure," agreed the other with patriotic resignation. After much tugging he released a notebook from the high compression of a waistcoat pocket and made an entry. A loose leaf caught his attention. "Some guy who wouldn't give his name said to tell you that the fertilizer was all in, the crop spoiled, and you were to let hollyhock and buttercup know."

Lurcock jerked his head toward the desk. "You've got the floral code, haven't you?"

"No. You took it back to the Department."

"Did I? Well, send a note by messenger around to Guy at the Interior and to Senator Braham. Make it snappy. The market closes at three."

"Is this a good one, Dan?" asked the other expectantly.

"It's the merger. The Commish is going to ditch it. Sell short for a ten point drop. And keep your fat head shut. Anything else?"

"Mullins shot a bellyfull of ache over the long distance from Pittsburgh."

"That's the Mann Act case. What's he beefin' about?"

"They gave him the hoose-gow, you know."

"Yeah. One year. He ought to be singin' hymns."

"He claims that when he came through we promised to get him off with a fine."

"The judge wouldn't stand for it."

"He wants his stake back."

The big man's face burned with a somber fury of greed. "Tell the squalling son-of-a-bitch, one more yap like that and I'll soak him for twenty years. That girl wasn't over sixteen." He rose and began to pace the floor. A small black grip near the desk got under his feet and he gave it a violent kick, sending it into

a corner where it yawned open, disgorging two neat oblong bundles, the sight of which had an appeasing effect upon the Lurcock wrath.

"What's this?"

"Love and kisses from that dago outfit in New York. Twenty-five grand. On account."

"For the hootch permit, huh?"

"Yep. If they can get liquor releases to run through the year, they'll make the purse up to a hundred."

"Now we're talking real money," commented the other with satisfaction.

"But they're cagey. They want proof that we can deliver the goods."

Lurcock grinned. "Fair enough. Did you set up the side-show for them?"

"Sure! I said, 'Gentlemen: You know the Attorney-General of the United States, don't you?' and their mouthpiece said: No: who was he and what did he do?"

"Gawd! What a bunch!"

"So I told 'em and said. 'If you don't believe me, ask your lawyer. Bring him around here when I phone you and you can stand across the street over there and see the Attorney-General walk right into this house like it was his own, and him and me mitt each other like a couple of old pals. Will that be good enough?' I says. And they said it would."

"I'll have the old boy here late this afternoon. He's our breadwinner, all right."

"How do you fix it about his cut?" queried the satellite curiously.

"He don't get any cut. He don't know what it's all about."

"Gee! I guess that's keepin' the workin' classes

in their places!" admired the other. "If we can cash in like that on old Hambone what couldn't we do if the President would show here once in awhile!"

"Lay off that," ordered the other so savagely that Jeff Sims hastened to apologize.

"I didn't mean any harm, Dan."

"The President isn't in this and he ain't going to be in it. Keep that in your fat head."

"*All* right; all *right*. Say, Dan, there's some dirty talk up on the Hill about the way Andy Gandy is running his Department of Public Health."

"Those fellows wouldn't think they were earning their pay if they didn't do so much gab-shooting per day."

"This ain't so good. They say he's negotiating for a swell fruit ranch out in California."

"How much?"

"A couple of hundred thou'."

"He wouldn't be such a God-damned fool. Everybody knows he was flat a year ago. Couldn't pay his taxes."

"Well, that's the dirt. Some of the Senators have been askin' how-come."

"Oh, well, I guess Andy ain't leaving any finger prints on the money he handles."

"No—no. But I was thinkin'——"

"Don't. You'll rupture a blood-vessel."

"—that if they did get to committeeing after Andy, the trail might branch off and lead to some of our business deals."

"What if it does? We aren't government officials. We're private citizens. Where would they get anything on us? At the bank? Records of a J. R. Black account. Who the hell is J. R. Black and what's he

got to do with us? At the broker's? Well, take the Michael McQuaid accounts, No. 1 and No. 2: what do they prove? The stuff that goes out home to the bank, all goes by express. If they ever did get that far in an investigation, I'd get out there first and they wouldn't find enough books left to run a Sunday school collection on. Why do you reckon I had that furnace put in the shack up the river?"

"I guess you're all right, Dan."

"For that matter, how could they get Andy Gandy? Not through the Department of Justice, I guess. Not while I'm there. Those pups on the Hill can't do anything. Our friends are too strong. If it came to a showdown, the Chief would go to the mat for Andy any time. They all know that. And they're all thinking of that record majority when they go up against the Chief, you bet."

"I guess that's right, too, Dan.'

"Who's stirring up the stink?"

"Oh, some of the prairie-dog lot. Welling is the worst."

"I'll put the secret service men on his trail."

"Think they can dig up anything?"

"If they can't find it, they can plant it," returned Lurcock with grim simplicity. "There's some pretty slick operators in that lot."

Sims, who was the repository and transmitter of a fund of current gossip, remarked: "Say, they tell me your lolly-boy playmate Charley Madrigal is thickin' it around the White House these days."

"He won't do any harm," observed Lurcock.

"He won't do any good to anybody but himself. He's for Number One *all* the time, that bozo."

"I can use him," was Lurcock's terse pronouncement.

"You can use most people," rejoined his admiring lieutenant.

"Can't stop an old dog from hunting."

Jeff understood this to refer to the fascinating Madrigal. "That's his game all right. 'Blue-eyed Burrl, the White House pearl.'" He hummed a snatch of privately current doggerel not too respectful of Mrs. Beryl Hartley, the plump and widowed niece of the President and, in the absence of Mrs. Markham, mistress of the Executive Mansion.

"I thought he was after Duke Forrest's wife."

"Oh, he's got her. Only the Duke don't know it yet. He's after 'em all. He's certainly a hellion for the wimmin." Envy tinged the thick accents of Mr. Sims. "There's a little firefly down at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving trailing around with him now."

"That's something else again, though, isn't it? The White House thing might be serious. Flowers and the wedding march and you and me in tail-cutts, Jeff, swellin' it in society."

"You think she's fallen for him? Gee! Wouldn't that put Cholly in the molasses!"

"Not so strong, maybe. He'd be too near the spotlight to do much business."

"That guy would graft if he was President."

"Presidents don't graft," contradicted Lurcock oracularly.

"Tough, ain't it," sighed Jeff. "They tell me the Old Man's hard up. They tell me"—his voice was discreetly lowered—"they've got him in red on the books at Thurlow & Co.'s for a hundred twenty nine thousand."

"That's a damn lie!" said Lurcock hotly. "Not

half that. He's in the hole, though. You know why?"

"That oil tip?"

Lurcock nodded.

"The Ohio bunch doubled-crossed him."

"No. The tip was right enough. They bored into salt water: that's all. Nobody could tell about that. So he lose."

"He wasn't the only one."

"Yes, he was."

"Why, I thought he put you all in!"

"Right for once. And when the bottom fell out, do you know what he did? He came down to the whist party that night and said: 'How many of you boys played that Sinsabaugh Oil tip?' All of us had. Naturally. 'What are you in for?' He made each of us tell him. I cut mine in half. I think Gandy doubled his. The Chief said: 'I'll stand the loss. It's up to me.'"

"That's what I call bein' a sport!" cried Jeff Sims in a sort of ecstasy.

"Bein' a God-damned fool," growled Lurcock, "and I love him for it. Well, I'm going to see that he gets it back, and more too and in oil. That's where Madrigal figures."

"Can you trust that fair-haired lad?" doubted the henchman.

"As far as I can see him with a glass eye. He's going to have an interest in this."

"Where does he come in?"

"He handles the White House niece."

"And where does she come in?"

"She and the President are joint heirs to a piece of property down in the low grounds of Oklahoma."

"Never heard there was any oil down there."

"Oil, nothing! Swamp-weed and water moccasins. A little growth of oak and cottonwood and cypress. Timberland: see?"

"Don't believe I do, Dan."

"Ever hear of the Clairborne Oil Company?"

"I'll say I have!"

"This administration has been pretty nice to them."

"I'll say it has!"

"So do some of the soreheads up on the Hill," chuckled Lurcock. "That's all been handled through the Department of the Interior, and our friend the Secretary has made his little killing on it. So we're going to let him out on this: he isn't looking for any more trouble. Well, Jim Clairborne has got some swell oil prospects that are in litigation and the other parties hold the land. He's going to swap his claim for the timberland——"

"What in hell does an oil company want of timber?"

"To make toothpicks for its office force, you damn bonehead," grinned his patron. "The trade will be under cover. The litigated oil land will be handled from this end and when it's all over, Old Bill will have a nice little income of fifty or sixty grand for himself, and fat Burrl will pick up eight or ten thou' a year for her cut."

"How you going to handle the litigation? Fix the judge?"

"Nothing like that. The government is going to take over the land, and if any question is asked, it's a Federal matter and any one that criticizes it is a God-damned muckraker and Bolshevik. Muckraking ain't good form under this administration, Jeff."

"Hot dog! Have you put it up to Mrs. Hartley yet?"

"No. That's Madrigal's job."

"And she puts it through with the Old Man?"

"Only to the extent that she gets his power of attorney to handle the deal. I'll tell him he don't need to go into details; that I'm looking after all that. He'll swallow anything I tell him."

"He knows who he can bank on, all right."

"Well, he can bank on Dan Lurcock. What he don't know won't hurt him, and the first and last he has to know is that oil has been struck on some family property that nobody ever figured to be worth more than a dollar an acre. Maybe we won't even tell him about the swap. It depends."

"Looks like a cinch. Where do I come in?"

"You take a run down to Oklahoma and check up on the records. Maybe the original transfer better be made to you. And say, Jeff, if there should be a page or two missing from the County Clerk's books, that wouldn't be so bad."

"I'll bet the County Clerk could use a new car," observed Jeff Sims.

"Make it a good one—on the Clairborne Oil and Refining Company."

From his place in the window, Sims had been, as was habitual with him, watching the tide of humanity that swirled past the house. Now he said:

"You ain't being shadowed or anything, are you, Dan?"

"Who? Me? Who'd do that?"

"There's a lollipop in a pink hat patrolling the block and looking over here."

"Let's see." He rose and lumbered across the room. "Jeest!" he ejaculated in disgust. "I'll bet she saw me."

As if to confirm this the pedestrian crossed the street and approached the door.

"Don't let her in," directed the householder.

Jeff opened the door and interposed his sweaty bulk before the visitor.

"I wanted to see Mr. Lurcock," she said uncertainly.

"Not in."

"I thought—I'm sure I saw——"

"Not in."

"He told me to come. Any noon. I meant to——"

"Not in," repeated the blank obstruction of Sim's boomy voice.

"Oh, let her in, Jeff," called Lurcock. "Might as well have it over."

She entered. She was a rather pretty, fluttery, flustered woman of thirty with a weak face and a deprecatory manner.

"What do *you* want?" demanded Lurcock, as Jeff discreetly withdrew.

"It's about Phil."

"Nothing doing."

"But, Dan, you said——"

"Don't you 'Dan' me, damn you! What did I say?"

"You said you'd get him a job as——"

"What time did I say it?"

"Why, last week. Don't you remem——"

"What *time?*"

Shamefaced and low-voiced she answered: "Why—I don't know. I s'pose it was three o'clock in the morning, maybe later."

"And where were you?"

"Why, right here in this house."

"Yes: but where in the house? Where were we?"

She began to cry. "I didn't ask you for anything,"

she protested. "You promised of your own accord. You said you'd get my brother that place in——"

"Well, I was probably drunk. So were you," he added deliberately, "or you wouldn't have been where you were. Now, can the blubber! This wasn't your first time, you know. You can't put over anything like that."

"I've always been respectable before," she wept. "I didn't think there was any harm, coming to your party. It must have been the drink. I'm not used to wine."

"Now, that'll be all right." He urged her firmly out of the house and shut the door upon her, after the indefinite assurance that he'd take her to dinner some evening and they'd fix up something for her brother. He whistled his servitor back. "Whew! Drink, women, and politics makes a bad mixture, Jeff. Gimme another highball. I need it."

He drank thirstily and got up. With his hand at the door, he once more addressed his underling.

"You hear all the guff, Jeff. What do you know about this talk of Old Bill and a woman?"

"Tim Fosgate knows."

"He's shut up like a clam."

"I hear she's some society dame."

"She lives in a swell locality."

"Are you having her house shadowed?"

"Of course."

"Won't the President be sore?"

"What he don't know won't hurt him."

"Why don't you go up and give her the once-over?"

"She wouldn't see me."

Jeff Sims whistled, awe-struck. "Say! She must have a swelled head!"

"I'd like to know what she wants with Bill."

"What do they all want with the President of the United States?" returned Jeff cynically. "It's just like being the heavyweight champion, or the home-run king."

"This might be something else, though," surmised Lurcock cautiously. "Well, so long, boy. Don't take any marked money."

Through the early hours of the afternoon Jeff Sims, valet, henchman, companion, private secretary, nurse, and confidant to the most energetic and central cog in the machinery of the greatest nation on earth, sat in his chosen window, shirt-sleeved, cross-legged, and happy, bellowing forth his running commentary to his extensive acquaintance among the passers-by, enjoyably spattering the pavement below with the by-product of his ceaseless mastication, frequently answering the telephone, once retiring with a caller to an inner room where the latter took off his belt and transferred therefrom a number of softish green oblongs, which the major domo enclosed in a safe; once going to the rear door and helping Maddon, the butler, with a trunk that sloshed and gurgled; and once running out, coatless, to intercept a hurrying Cabinet officer who looked none too pleased at the informal encounter. A busy, useful, bright career, was that of Jefferson Silsbee Sims.

At four-fifteen, the lessor of the house returned. Fifteen minutes later the Attorney-General of the United States drove up in his limousine and stepped out accompanied by a secret service man who acted as his attendant—in case of a mishap. The Hon. Morse Hambidge was a brisk, smooth little grouse-cock of a man whose hard-set shoulders and wiry strut sug- the filmy-peering, vague eyes, the veiny, old-man's gested a virile self-confidence. Only when one noted

hands, and the tremulous chin, did the reports, scandal-whispered throughout Washington, of the complete sway exercised by the burly Lurcock over him become explicable. He advanced martially up the steps, where he was greeted by Jeff Sims, an encounter which appeared to give great satisfaction to two swarthy gentlemen accompanied by a third, carrying a lawyer's brief case, who, at their observation post across the street, exchanged confirmatory nods and glances.

In the inner room Dan Lurcock welcomed the visitor.

"Very kind of you to come, General."

"Not-'t-tall. Not-'t-tall" chattered the little man. "Glad to oblige. . . . Drink? No: no. Doctor's orders. Doctor's orders. Well per-haps. One little one. Very mild. Enough. I thank you. Your verigood health."

"About the Van Sittart appointment in New York, General?"

"Ah, yes. Van Sittart. Good man. Excellent man."

"So we all thought," returned the other blandly. "But it appears that his party record is not altogether clear."

"What's that? Record? Not clear? Gawbless my soul! Impossible, Lurcock."

"It's right, though. He won't do."

"Awkward, awkward," muttered the little man. "I had practically assured the senior Senator of my support."

"So I understood," said the other drily. "Well, you got off on the wrong foot."

"Really, Lurcock! You distress me."

"Yes. The President has had private advices which have influenced him to change his mind. Therefore

the Department must withhold its approval. Shall I give it out to the newspaper boys?"

"Yes—yes. Certainly. If the President disapproves, the matter is settled. Sorry. Thought Van Sittart a good choice, myself. Anything else, Lurcock? . . . No: no: really! No more, I thank you. Good day. Good day."

He pottered about, gathering up hat, gloves, stick, papers, with little, pecking motions, delivered himself intact into the hands of his waiting attendant, and was whisked away.

"Like taking candy from a child," commented Lurcock to Jeff Sims as the door closed.

"Did the President get a line on Van Sittart, Dan?"

"Hell, no! He hasn't even heard about the case, and he won't. I'll take the responsibility. Wouldn't come through for a measly six thousand for expenses," he growled. "We don't want any pikers in this administration."

CHAPTER V

THE OVERMAN

On his way back from the Department, Daniel Lurcock had nodded carelessly to Senator Peter Thorne, taking tea on M. Jarry's terrasse with a woman whose face he did not know. He would have been surprised at the veteran's commentary:

"There's your enemy."

"I didn't know I had any enemies."

"The man responsible for the espionage over you."

"Really? I should like to meet him some day; to see what kind of person he is."

"The most dangerous man in Washington."

"How delightful of you to try to frighten me, dear Pe-tah!"

He shook his handsome old head. *"Pas si bête.* Never attempt the impossible is the first rule of politics."

"Oh! Then your estimate of him was political."

"Not wholly. Politically he is dangerous, of course, because of his influence over the President. No other political force can stand against it; only another personal influence as strong or stronger."

"Is that what you are seeking? And why?"

"Because I can see the Party headed for a smash. There are things going on beneath the surface—and there isn't a man in sight capable of making Willis Markham face the facts."

"Isn't there a man in his Cabinet strong enough to take a stand?"

"They can't get at him, except those of Lurcock's ilk. Sheldon and Covert and Maxson haven't his confidence. To him they are 'highbrows,' which is anathema. He's restless in their company, afraid and distrustful of them at heart. No," he concluded morosely, "there isn't a man in sight who can do anything. Not a man."

A glint of mischief was in her eyes as she lifted them to him. "I understood you to say 'man,' Peter."

"Well?"

"It's a dare, isn't it?"

"It's a plea, if anything. A forlorn hope. At least, I should say it was forlorn, if it weren't you. If you really would set your mind to politics——"

"No, Pe-tah. I don't think I shall go in for politics."

"Then——"

"But I might, perhaps, go in for Willis Markham."

Peter Thorne blinked. "Why?"

"He interests me. What other reason does a woman ever have?"

"You've seen him again," he inferred.

"No. I've had a letter. By messenger. A queer, stilted, uneasy kind of letter. Addressed to the Comtesse d'Aillys."

"It would be," he smiled. "A confession?"

"You might call it that. A revelation."

"Jove manifesting himself in a lightning flash to the enraptured Semele."

"He didn't strike me as particularly Olympian, but perhaps that was his muddy face. And I'm certainly not inclined to the rôle of the too-receptive nymph."

"I expect not. Did the messenger wait for an answer?" he added with a twinkle of malice.

"No, really!" she protested. "He isn't as gauche as that."

"Perhaps not. Are you going to see him again?"

"What do you think?"

"By all means, if you ask my advice."

"That's your scheming and political soul, Peter."

"But you have made up your mind to see him, haven't you?"

"Even so, Mephistopheles. Very publicly. Aren't there receptions or something where one may view the great?"

"Yes; there are informal noon receptions at the Executive Office. There you will see our Willis in his favorite rôle of Big Friend of All the World. It's a bit fulsome but—well, instructive. Shall I get you a special card for Thursday? Or, better still, take you?"

"Oh, no! I'd rather go quite by myself."

"As you wish. Heaven knows it's no treat to me to see him kinging it. I'll be curious to get your impressions."

"Fair exchange. You shall come to tea and get them, if you will furnish me with biographical data now."

"Hm-m-m-m. How deep do you want to go?"

"From the very beginning, please. I want it all—all the political part, I mean."

"Very good. Then, to start with you are to picture a small-town hotel in Michigan. A man of thirty is having his boots blacked in the backyard, wishing he had passed up that last round of drinks the night before, and figuring that the final jackpot put him about

forty dollars to the good on the evening. Enter Destiny in—I think—a frock coat. It should have been, for Daniel Lurcock was already a figure of importance in state politics, known as an astute and effective lobbyist. He had passed his novitiate, been the subject of a legislative investigation——"

"For what?"

"Bribery, naturally. Exonerated but not untainted. Equally in the regular course of events the public service corporation for which he was acting got the indictment quashed. Having then qualified in a financial sense, he was elected State Treasurer and grafted so moderately that nobody objected."

"But it isn't Mr. Lurcock whose history——"

"Wait a minute. We're coming to our hero. The observant politician, picking his breakfast teeth, glimpses the subject of our sketch, sitting on the bootblack's high chair as if it were a throne. 'Who's that young feller?' 'Name's Markham. Comes from the Southern Tier; Kanadarsie County.' 'Fine head. Splendid head.' He walks around and takes a look from the other side. Yes; a really noble profile. Frank, open expression. Steady eyes, good chin, pleasant mouth. Well-built. But chiefly he is impressed with that statesman-like brow and the architectural dome above it. 'What does he do?' 'Dunno, hardly. Little lumberin' on the river. Little contractin' here and there. Odd tricks. Guess you'll find him mostly hangin' around the Eureka Pool Parlor."

"Our Daniel, come to judgment, scrapes acquaintance with the noble brow. Finds the younger man pleasant, magnetic, friendly and quick of intelligence. 'You ought to go into politics.' 'I've thought of it,'

admits the other. 'Ever get up to the Capital?' 'Once in a while.' 'Come in and see me next time you come up. We need young blood in the party.'

"Markham didn't think much about it. He wasn't especially ambitious. But a month later he had some business at the Capital and remembered Lurcock's pleasant invitation. Went in to see him. They talked. Lurcock liked him; liked him even better after they talked. 'We can deal, you and I,' he said after they'd had a few rounds of drinks. 'How's that?' 'I'm going to make you Governor of this state.' 'Much obliged.' Our hero inclined to take it as a joke. Not at all. Lurcock meant every word of it. Let him get that magnificent head into the legislature, where it would be on view, and there was nothing he might not do with it. 'Will you take the nomination for Assembly?' 'Me? I could never get it.' 'On a platter! I'll see to that.' 'Well—all right—of course.' They sealed the compact in a final drink. Champagne, no less. That shows how serious it was already in Lurcock's mind. A rite." The man of experience chuckled gently.

"Then and there Dan Lurcock hitched his wagon to a star and he's been hauling it up hill ever since."

"Do you give Willis Markham no credit for his own success?"

"Luck. I give him luck in the superlative degree. And adroitness. Personal honesty, too. There is a peculiar feature. He sat in three of the most corrupt legislatures that ever looted a state, played in with his party, was the bosom friend of all the grafters, supported their measures, stood by them when trouble threatened, and apparently never took a cent for himself. Lurcock's shrewd guidance? Or some fundamen-

tal puritanism in himself? I don't know. I doubt if he knows, himself.

"How long it took our astute lobbyist to discover that the inside of that head failed to justify the amazing outside, nobody has ever found out. Not long, I fancy. Lurcock must have fathomed that bright and shallow soul pretty soon, and seen him for what he was as a man and a politician—torpid, good-humored, complacent, friendly, indulgent to himself, obliging to others, as loyal as a Samurai, full of party piety, a hater of the word 'No,' faithful to his own code of private honor, reliable, and as standardized as a Ford car."

"Hardly the picture of a man who was to become President of the United States."

"Luck and Lurcock. Never forget the pulling power of the star-hitched Daniel. By this time he had developed a real affection for his protégé. Markham was and is an easy person to be fond of. Never forget that, either."

"Warning, Peter?"

"We are talking politics. From the lower house he rose to the upper, and thence by the favor of the party leaders, to the governorship. They say that the night he was elected he actually cried on Lurcock's shoulder. Emotional about it. His administration was pretty straight. Lurcock was looking for something bigger than loot now. His own reputation had spread so that he was called to all parts of the country as an adviser to the lobbying interests where there were difficult and dangerous deals to put through; he was the first interstate lobbyist and in his job he formed associations with the men back of politics everywhere, and got an insight into the political ma-

chinery in California, Massachusetts, Florida, Maine and everything in between. All of this was at Willis Markham's service."

"Why didn't he use it to promote himself?"

"His record wouldn't stand the light. Not for elective office. Markham's would. So he hauled his star to the United States Senate and deposited him there."

"'Who nothing common did, nor mean, upon that memorable scene'?" she inquired lightly.

"He played poker."

"Is that all?"

"Practically."

"And is it important?"

"Oh, decidedly. It made friends for him. Not in the inner circle that runs the Senate, to be sure. As a Senator he was negligible, except on votes. There he manifested the most unimpeachable regularity. A model of party discipline. That, also, counts. But nobody except Lurcock ever dreamed of him as presidential timber until the Markham luck stepped in and made him a national figure.

"A campaign was on in his home state. He had gone home to lend a hand; always at the party's call. He and Lurcock and Tim Fosgate—your acquaintance—out doing some quiet work, motored into a small mill town and came on a crowd of young toughs tossing an idiot girl in a blanket. With all his lazy good-nature, Markham has a fighting streak in him. As soon as he took in the situation he honked his horn and drove for the center of the mess. Out he jumped. The other two followed. They were in for it at once. Markham and Lurcock are both big, powerful men, and Fosgate had a baseball bat that he was taking home to

his nephew, or things might have turned out worse. They were all pretty well hammered up before they got the child into the car, with the blanket so tight-clenched in her fists that the doctor they took her to had to pry her fingers loose. When he had fixed her up he said, 'Where's all the blood from?' 'Search me,' said Markham. 'I'm going to,' said the doctor. He found a slash deep into the flesh of the shoulder and sewed it up. As they were leaving, Lurcock happened to look at the blanket. 'Well, I'm damned!' he said. 'Look what's here.' It was a tattered, faded old wreck of an American flag.

"Imagination is a great asset in politics. Lurcock saw his chance. He and Fosgate fixed up the story between them—Fosgate had been a country correspondent, so he knew the ropes—and the next day the nation learned how Senator Markham had fought his way through a mob of ferocious Reds to rescue the insulted flag of his country, and had been dangerously wounded in the struggle. Of such stuff is history made."

"Isn't your sarcasm overdone, Peter? It seems to have been a plucky performance."

"Granted. It was. On the part of all three. But the distinguishing feature was the shrewdness with which Lurcock and Fosgate kept in the background and used the laurels where they would do the most good. They carefully preserved the flag. Restored in color enough to make it recognizable, it went to the national convention with them and at the psychological moment it was brought out to head the parade which bore the Hon. Willis Markham to victory."

"Oh, come, Peter! You don't really expect me to

believe that a cheap piece of clap-trap like that decided the nomination."

"No. That was decided more quietly. But the flag helped. Am I to go into the technical details of the nomination?"

"Yes; as to Markham's part in it."

"He took no part. He sat in his room and sadly told his friends that he might as well withdraw because he knew that he hadn't a chance, and it would clear the air for the others if he got out. Lurcock had a struggle to dissuade him from that act of self-immolation. That was the year when the split between the East and West first looked dangerous. It will look more dangerous later on; but it was patched up for the time, and that is where Markham came in.

"After the preliminary cleaning out, in which my candidate fell, there were three survivors and half a dozen conflicting interests left. The New York crowd wanted assurances as to the Secretary of the Treasury, the oil and mining combinations demanded an amenable Secretary of the Interior. The drys wanted this. The wets wanted that. There was pulling and hauling on tariff, international policies, the farmer's grievances, and so on. But the oil crowd had the money and a nice assortment of reasonably priced delegates. Bowdoin and Goodman, the leading candidates, had both declined to sign on the dotted line. They resented taking orders over the counter, being gentlemen—which is a drawback in politics, my dear."

"You mean that Mr. Markham isn't?"

"I shall value your opinion on that point, say a year hence. Certainly the oil men were overperemptory. 'One of these three men for the Interior: one of these two for Attorney-General.' They dickered and

threatened, first with one man, then the other. Markham was being held back all the time. General Goodman finally refused to buy. They sprung the scandal about the financing of his campaign by Wall Street—as if every campaign weren't financed by Wall Street! —and he went through the ropes. It looked like Bowdoin.

"Now enters an obscure, modest, but not wholly impotent figure, an elderly gentleman of small pretensions but wide experience, lofty views but practical methods, a devoted soul, according to his dim lights——"

"Named Peter Thorne."

"Unerring feminine intuition. Some time before the convention I had discovered that a handful of delegates from the sovereign state of Missouri were in a receptive mood. By my suggestion, though not by my procurement, for that would have meant bribery—a practice repellent to my instincts, my dear—it was arranged that these hesitant votes should go to Mr. Bowdoin."

"Bowdoin? But I thought that Fox was your candidate."

"Exactly. It seemed to me probable that Bowdoin would be the man we had to beat."

"And so you bought—I beg your pardon—assured votes for him? Inexplicable."

"One of the apparent contradictions of politics. The weapon which I had intended for use in behalf of Senator Fox was turned to the purpose of Senator Markham."

"With your consent?"

"By my procurement. I had come to the belief that Mr. Bowdoin was too positive and independent a character to be a desirable president. We had suffered

our troublesome experience in the past with Roosevelt and Wilson; the country needed a more—ah—ductile personality; some one to be counted upon as responsive to the influence of the elder statesmen as represented by the august body in which I sit."

"Peter, if you become oratorical I shall know that you are holding back something."

"On the contrary, my frankness impinges upon the treasonable. I am exhibiting skeletons in shrouds of dirty linen. The delegates were bought and paid for, for delivery to Bowdoin."

"With Bowdoin money?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Bowdoin knew nothing of it. He does not believe in—er—direct financial action. Unfortunately, innocence is no safeguard in politics. It is better to be wise as a serpent than harmless as a dove.

"Meantime Markham was being quietly pushed forward. His strict party loyalty had commended him to the Eastern financiers. On the other hand, he was a Westerner and had always cultivated the good will of the farmers. He could heal the breach if any one could. To those of us who believe that the Senate in its wisdom can conduct the affairs of the nation better than any one man——"

"Do you really believe that, Mr. Senator?"

"Of course. The job is too big for any individual. We crush our presidents under a mass of detail. Markham had sat in the Senate; understood our methods. We could rely on him for conformity. There remained the oil crowd to be dealt with. They had a secret meeting scheduled for midnight. In the expressive language of the day, Dan Lurcock crashed the meet-

ing. There was some confusion, I understand, when those bull shoulders of his hurtled through the door. But he had come there not to fight, but to conciliate. Anything in reason that they wanted, Senator Markham would agree to. Cabinet officers, policies, patronage. They could rely upon Willis Markham. When had he ever gone back on a friend, a supporter or the Party?

"They were convinced. But Bowdoin still had a long lead. Then the scandal leaked out. Bowdoin money had been spent to buy delegates like cattle over the counter. The convention rang with it. It got on the wires. Two of the delegates made a half-confession. The half-truth—which was all that they themselves knew—was more effective than the whole. Poor Bowdoin! I suppose he is still wondering what happened to him. The convention swung to Markham and he was nominated, to the frenzied waving of the flag which he had defended with his heart's blood. For the rest—you have probably already read 'The Career and Speeches of the Hon. Willis Markham.'"

Edith Westervelt drew a long breath. "And that is politics."

"That," he confirmed gravely, "is politics."

"I am sure that the 'Career and Speeches,' which I haven't read, would tell me nothing additional."

"Perhaps not. Whereas I have told you too much. I can't remember when I have been so garrulous."

"Thank you, Peter. I take that as a compliment."

"Can you doubt it? It is one of your seven deadly charms that you make men indiscreet while preserving always your own discretion."

"Would you think association with the President of the United States a proof of discretion?"

"I would think it difficult on any terms that a woman of your position could admit."

"My position, such as it is, is sometimes a bore."

"Of your pride, then."

"A mask for timidity."

"Of which no one will ever accuse you."

"In this fray I go armed," she asserted gayly, "armed with full knowledge."

"From me? By no means."

"Pee-tah! How contemptible of you. What dark secret are you concealing in the life of our hero?"

"None. I've completed the personal sketch. But however much you know about Markham you will never understand his administration (neither, by the way, does he) until you have a line on the men surrounding him."

"The 'whist parties'?"

"Largely. Lurcock I've sketched for you. Markham wanted to make him Attorney-General in fact, but the slight drawback that he had never been regularly admitted to the bar, prevented. So he put Hambidge in for Lurcock to handle. Hambidge is honorable, upright, of respectable legal record, a gentleman, but unfortunately he is a little, just a lee-tle——"

"Well?" she inquired as he paused.

"—just a very leetle bit epileptic."

"Oh, come, Peter!" she revolted. "There are limits to one's credulity."

"Quite true, I assure you. He isn't the first Cabinet officer of his kind. One of our most distinguished presidents had an epileptic as Postmaster-General, and a far less tactful one than the present incumbent, who seldom performs in public. His ailment makes him self-distrustful and, so, amenable to the influence of

a stronger character. All is well in the Department of Justice. There will be no open scandal there while Lurcock is on the lid. He is too shrewd."

"Did I hear a slight emphasis on the 'there'?"

"I'm afraid of Gandy," he said abruptly.

"The Secretary of Public Health?"

"Yes."

"What makes him dangerous?"

"His greed. He can't smell money without his ears twitching."

"What an unpleasantly vivid trick of speech you have, Peter!"

"And to make matters worse, young Madrigal is with him."

"Is he another of the President's whist party friends?"

"Yes. Gandy, too. He and Markham played poker together when they were Senators. Gandy affects the Wild Western pose; carries a gun and is supposed to have killed his man. He's no more of a doctor than Lurcock is of a lawyer, but the oil crowd backed him and Markham put him in, fly-by-night medical college diploma and all, in spite of the scandalized howls of the profession. He's doing very well, thank you—for Gandy. That's all he's interested in."

"And young Madrigal?"

"Not so young, but the curled and scented darling of every telephone girl, stenographer, and department flapper in Washington. Bland as a cake of soap. Magnetic in a greasy sort of way. A great and confident talker; always with the latest story up his sleeve. 'Full of wise cracks and modern frinstances,' as some newspaper correspondent once said of him. He's the fair-

haired boy of the White House and is devoting himself to the President's niece, *pour le bon motif.*"

"What about my seal-like little man?"

"Fosgate? Politically nil. He wants nothing but to be around where Willis Markham is. Disinterested devotion. The devotion of the moth to the star—the star that is hitched to the wagon that Dan Lurcock pulled so mightily. Fosgate did his share of the pulling, too, though he would modestly disclaim it. Hero worship is his ailment."

"Any more in the charmed circle?"

"A casual Senator or two. Secretary Guy of the Interior who was forecast as the scandal-center of the administration but has been playing safe and letting Gandy do the dirty work. Forrest, an ex-bootlegger with a beautiful wife to whom Madrigal has paid his dubious court in the past. And Sig McBride to whose house you have received frequent invitations."

"How do you know that?"

"Everybody gets 'em," he grinned, "whose name is printed in the Society column. He's an amusing soul, our Sig, an unattached Crœsus who loves to play the amiable lackey to greatness. He and Fosgate are the only ones that aren't out for money."

"Markham himself?" said Edith Westervelt quickly.

"No. He is the tool of grafters but not one himself."

"Why should he let them use him?"

"He doesn't know what it's all about. Haven't I made it clear that he's a fanatic where his friends are concerned? If there ever does come a crash, he'll go down with them before he can be warned against them. What can be done with that kind of astigmatism?"

"Why doesn't somebody tell him?"

"He wouldn't listen." Abruptly he said, "A woman could tell him, if——" and stopped.

"If he loved her," she supplied.

"If he loved her with a love passing the love of friends."

"There was a curious hiatus in your history," she commented.

"Was there? I'm not conscious of it."

"No woman figured in it."

"Women have not figured in Willis Markham's life except, perhaps, in the most casual and—well—practical way."

"His wife?"

"As good as dead. She will be soon." He added more gently: "If she had not broken she might be the one to warn him against his friends. As it is, he rattles around happily enough in his job, though there are times when, I suspect, he begins to realize how big it is."

"And how small he is?"

"No. Too well buttressed with sycophants. Every president is."

"It must be a lonely job."

"Not for him. He's too busy being the big friend of all the world, as I told you. It has cured him of his laziness. He was a loafer in the Senate. Now he's a conscientious plodder, though the comedy of it is that he doesn't know where he's going."

"If he ever finds out?"

"Ah," answered Thorne, "that might be the tragedy of it."

CHAPTER VI

THE MILLS OF THE DEMI-GODS

AMAZEMENT had been the reaction of Washington when Handy Andy Gandy was appointed Secretary of Public Health. It was just a little too raw. That he would land a fat job was to be expected. Hadn't he been a chum of Willis Markham's in the Senatorial days? Wasn't he a regular attendant at the Crow's Nest whist parties? But how did he, with his fake degree from the shadiest of diploma factories, qualify for the highest medical office in the government? And, even more puzzling, what did he figure on getting out of it?

The new Secretary answered neither question. He simply sawed wood. First he set forth his plan to combine all medical activities of the Federal government, a project so dear to the profession that it almost forgave his appointment. The Secretaries of War and Navy surrendered their hospitals and equipment without protest, being politicians of too much tact to oppose the President's move on behalf of his friend, Gandy; and though the United States Public Health Service entered a spirited objection, it was helpless, being a mere appendage of the Treasury Department, ruled and overruled by Maxson, the frail high priest of high finance, whose interest in matters scientific was nil.

Against Secretary-Doctor Gandy's second great in-

novation, there could be no reasonable cavil, the establishment of a chain of tuberculosis hospitals across the country. As economy and efficiency had commended the first project, so humanity supported the second. A bill conferring upon the new department the right to condemn and occupy land for hospital purposes was passed, after word had gone around that President Markham desired this great humanitarian work to stand as a monument to his administration, by a Congress still subservient in spirit to the impressive Markham plurality. Nobody was particularly surprised when Charles M. Madrigal went into Gandy's office as his right-hand man, for Charley was another pal of the President's. Shrewdly judging that wherever Handy Andy settled there would be molasses, Madrigal had prevailed upon his friend, Bill, to put him there. His first stroke of genius was to institute a triple inventory comprehending all supplies and equipment of the three services to be absorbed. The final figures, in shining millions, imparted their glow to his eyes and even lighted up the dull orbs of his superior when presented to that able gentleman.

"We'll sell 'em," said the Secretary.

Madrigal goggled. "All?"

"Clean sweep."

"Gee! But, look here, Doc! Isn't there a lot of that stuff that could be used?"

"Unfit," said Secretary Gandy. "Condemned."

Madrigal whistled in impressible admiration. Business on this scale was beyond even his dreams. But there was a fly in the ointment. "They'll have to be put up for competitive bidding."

"Will they?"

"That's the law."

"There's a way around most laws."

"What way?"

"What are *you* here for?" asked the Secretary with chill finality.

The blithe Madrigal began to perceive that he was expected to earn his money. "I'll look into it," he undertook.

"About these sheets, now, at the Millvale Stores." The Secretary examined the list prepared by his subordinate. "How badly damaged are they?"

Madrigal stared. "Damaged? They're new. Not unboxed yet."

"How—badly—damaged—are—they?"

"Oh!" Madrigal gulped, swallowing the idea. "Pretty poor shape, I expect." He had an inspiration. "Some of the storerooms leak."

"Exactly. According to this tally sheet they are inventoried at $1.23 apiece. Excessive," pronounced the Hon. Anderson Gandy severely.

"Oh, abslootly!" Madrigal was getting his clue.

"What would you consider a fair selling price, in view of the—er—damage?"

"You tell me and I'll tell you," chirped Madrigal brightly, hoping to cover his comprehensive ignorance of the cotton goods business.

"I am calling upon you for an estimate."

"Well, haffa dollar."

"M-m-m! Rather high on a bulk sale."

"Make it a quarter," said the subordinate with desperate generosity.

"At such a price I know of a vurry reliable firm in Detroit that might be interested. Here is their card. Now, blankets. M-m-m! Five thousand pairs at Keggston Landing, I see."

"Moth-eaten," Madrigal improvised.

"How unfortunate!" The Honorable Secretary grinned. "But some value remains, I suppose."

"Not more than $1.12 a pair," said the pupil firmly.

"Cost $3.88. Yes: that would be about right. You might try these people." He wrote a name and address on a card. "Keeping me quite out of it, of course."

"Absolutely!" repeated Charley Madrigal.

They passed on to surgical gauze, toothbrushes, floor cleaner in thousands of cans, mosquito wire, drugs, iron cots, and as the list grew and the enthusiasm of Mr. Madrigal warmed, the Secretary was obliged several times to check his too-apt pupil and suggest that there was such a thing as moderation in the bargain counter appeal.

"You get the idea," said he.

"I'll say I do!" Obviously the idea was to buy dear and sell cheap, a new and prodigiously profitable principle in economics. The weasel brain of Madrigal perceived that by clever juggling of prices he could hold out for himself quite as much as he turned over to his superior. Why not? Wasn't fifty-fifty a fair cut? He had all the work to do: all the risk to take. Risk? That didn't count, in his dollar-dazzled vision. Who was going to kick? And if they did kick, what would that get 'em? Bill Markham would show the soreheads where they got off. Trust Old Bill to take care of his pals.

Later there was born of these shrewd negotiations that flood of "Army Sales," "Navy Sales," "Government Supply Stores" and fly-by-night merchandising which offered to the public real values at the expense of legitimate retail trade, unable to compete with such

bargains. The immediate effect was that Charley Madrigal in his enthusiasm went out and ordered the highest priced car on the market.

Satisfied that these operations were in safe hands, the Secretary of Public Health now turned his attention to another source of emolument. Hospitals were to be dotted here and there across the map. Hospitals must have land to stand on, and his department was empowered to purchase the land or even to acquire it by condemnation, though this was another phase which the astute Dr. Gandy, with his knowledge of western oil and mineral values, meant to put to another use. Real estate operators could be found who would not be insensible to opportunities of quick sales to a generous buyer, nor impenetrable to the suggestion of a modest split. Uncle Sam could afford the money in a humanitarian cause such as this. A broad view of the enterprise was indicated. The Hon. Anderson Gandy went to the Crow's Nest to see his pal, Daniel Lurcock. Him he found shooting craps with Jeff Sims for quarters. Gandy did not wholly trust Lurcock, the scope of whose unofficial power and influence made him uneasy, and Lurcock did not really like Gandy, whom he considered a bit of a tightwad; but they worked together well enough when their interests ran parallel.

"I want to talk to you, Dan," said the Secretary of Public Health.

"Talk," returned Lurcock caressing the "bones" professionally between his palms before releasing them. Rattling, they fell, rolled, stopped. "Hell's bells! Twelve again."

"Privately."

"Jeff is in on all my business."

"I'll go mix a drink. You can't hurt my feelings," said the factotum with his grin of pudgy good-humor.

"You've got friends out through the country that can be trusted with inside business, haven't you?" said the visitor as the door closed.

"In every state," was the positive affirmation. No mere boastfulness, this. Daniel Lurcock's political strength lay in the fact that he had become by virtue of psychological as well as financial gifts, a consulting lobbyist of national fame. Wherever there was a difficult or dangerous official situation, a shady deal to put over, a threatening scandal to suppress, a row imminent between politics and the business interests which might spill the beans and put good men in wrong, this Ulysses of the political underworld, knowing cities and the hearts of men, was urgently summoned. Thus he had established important and confidential connections everywhere and had bestowed and received favors which constituted a debt and a bond between himself and his allies all over the country, a series of notes payable on demand in good faith, service, and helpfulness.

"In every state," repeated the Secretary with appreciation. "I can use 'em. If they're right."

"They're right. What's up?"

"Purchase of hospital sites."

The other nodded. "Thought so. Where do you start?"

"Massachusetts."

Lurcock briefly consulted his remarkable memory. "I've got a firm for you," he announced. "Who'll handle it on your end?"

"What's the big idea?" asked the suddenly suspicious

"I thought of Duke Forrest."

Lurcock, and added, as if answering himself; "He's got a hell of a good-looking wife."

"Nothing like that," disclaimed Gandy virtuously. "Charley Madrigal was giving her a whirl for a time."

"He and Forrest are pretty thick."

"Think the Duke is safe?"

"Safe as anybody. He knows the ground there. Operated through New England with those booze release permits."

"I know all about that. He did his job. But, say, why not give Jeff, here" (he jerked his head toward the inner room) "a look-in on some of this?"

("He wants to get his bit from both ends," reflected the outraged Gandy; but this was no time to haggle.) "Certainly," he agreed. "Later on. There'll be enough to go around. The Old Man's taken quite a fancy to Forrest, too," he added. Thus they habitually referred to the President who was ten years younger than either of them. It marked the respect due his high office and the affection evoked by his amiable personality.

"You wanta keep it dark from the Old Man," warned Lurcock.

"That's easy."

"He's had a change of heart."

"How's that?" demanded the other, his ever wakeful suspicions startled.

"Since he's worked into this job of being President, he's off the old stuff."

"Sure! Of course. For publication."

"I'm telling you," insisted Lurcock. "Bill understands the game; he's no lily-finger. He knows that

guys don't go into politics for their health and he never blamed the other fellow for getting his bit; he'd even give a friendly shove now and again, when, as, and if needed, provided it wasn't too raw. Bill was always broad-minded and practical, even though he never touched money himself, not even when it was slipped to him under cover. But now he's got religion."

"Jeest!" interjected the other, appalled. "What d'you mean?"

"Oh, not psalm-singing. Religion about his job. Read me a regular sermon the other day, all about what the Party expects of us and pulling together and playing the game on the level, now that we're in the Big League. Meant it, too."

"Second term stuff. That's what's biting him."

"Maybe. But as far as our little operations go, what he don't know won't hurt him."

"But isn't he liable to think it's queer that Forrest——"

"He's going to be too busy to think," prophesied Lurcock grimly. "Too busy with his job. The Old Man has developed a hunch for hard work. That's another angle of his change of heart."

"Start up the chariot and we'll all go to heaven together," chanted Gandy sardonically.

Lurcock raised his voice. "Hey, Jeff! Where are those damn drinks?"

"Right here, boss." Jeff Sims reappeared bearing a tray full of pleasant clinkings. It was he who gave them a toast in his thick, cheery accents.

"Here's to small risks and big profits."

"How are things on the Hill?" inquired Lurcock after drinking. Gandy was supposed to keep tabs on

the Senate for the operators at the Crow's Nest, which he was able to do effectually through his former connections there.

"Quiet enough just now. There's always a little talk."

"Who's doing it?"

"The jay-walkers mostly."

"We've got that bunch where we want 'em under this administration," said Lurcock with satisfaction. "Every time one of 'em tries to insurge he gets a crack over the beezer with the gavel."

"They don't dare peep, them S. O. B's," cackled Jeff Sims.

"There's not so many that the Secret Service hasn't got something on."

"Can you blame 'em for not exactly loving you up on the Hill?" said the other with a short laugh.

"Me?" The unofficial potentate seemed innocently surprised. "What have I got to do with it?"

"That's what they want to know in the coat room."

"They've got nothing on me, anyway," reflected the other comfortably. "Anything I do, I do as a private citizen. I'm not a government official. Now, with you," he added spitting out the remains of a dead and mangled cigar, "it's different."

"What are you getting at?" Andy glared.

"Not a thing."

"I can take care of myself."

"I'll bet on it. And you've landed in the right place to do it."

"Look here, Dan Lur——"

But the other had raised a hamlike hand. "Now don't you get het up, Doc. I'm only telling you for your own good."

"Go on and tell me, then. Come down to cases." said the other in sulky defiance.

"Well, since you press me, I'd suggest that you go slow with your deals for a while. There's no harm in that, is there? It don't pay to advertise in some lines."

"What deals?" demanded Gandy.

Lurcock waved his hand. "Not inside the Department. I wouldn't question that. But anything outside that might be traceable. There was a rumor of some real estate in California that you've been looking into."

"It's a God-damned lie, and you can mind your own business."

"All right, all *right!*" returned Lurcock, unruffled. "You needn't get peeved. You'll be around to the party to-morrow?"

The Secretary of Public Health hesitated. "Sure," he answered more amiably. "Send me a memo of that Detroit firm, will you?" He left.

Said Lurcock; "He's up to something."

"Sure, he is. What is the deal?"

"I don't just exactly know. I'm afraid of that guy, Jeff. His mouth waters when he talks business. That's a bad sign. He'll spill the beans so wide we'll all get scalded if we don't watch him."

Jeff Sims nodded solemnly. "Them damn amateurs!" he growled.

CHAPTER VII

THE PRESIDENT ENTERTAINS

"Time's up, Mr. President."

Frothingham, the young giant of an Assistant Secretary, magnificent in his morning coat and pink rosebud, stood at Willis Markham's elbow. The Chief Executive rose, and with his left hand manipulated his right, cramped and nerveless from repeating his signature four hundred and eighty times. Charley Madrigal had promised to teach him in an hour to sign with his left—Charley was fertile of schemes like that—but where was he to find the hour? Now he had to submit that same exhausted hand to the friendly grasp of a small army of people. Oh, well! It gave them pleasure and it made votes and it wasn't much to do. Of all the routine of the office, this was the part he most liked. At least it was human.

"Much of a crowd to-day?"

"About the average, sir."

Walking behind Frothingham, the President envied the easy set and hang of the younger man's clothes. It was all very well to patronize hometown merchants: he had always stressed hometown loyalty in addresses to commercial organizations; but just the same those Fifth Avenue fellows got something that the Warfleet Corners tailors missed. He decided to ask Frothingham about it. After all, one suit wouldn't hurt anybody's feelings.

"Who made that suit, Art?"

Immensely flattered the young man gave the name.

"Shall I have them send over their head cutter, sir?"

"Well, I—I don't know. Be pretty expensive, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, I don't think they'd charge anything extra. Not to *you.*" Nevertheless his ingenuous face was shadowed. Why couldn't they pay the President a decent salary so that he wouldn't have to skimp and contrive and economize? It was a damn shame!

The subdued rumor of the crowd mounted to something like a roar as the doors opened. Markham took his stance with his back to the end of the long table used at cabinet meetings, and set himself like a strong swimmer against onrushing surf. The attendants were all in place, Frothingham had gone into the hall to give the word. He spoke. The word passed. The flood poured upon Willis Markham.

Reach. Grasp. Draw across. On. Next.—Reach. Grasp. Draw across. On. Next.—Reach. Grasp Draw across. On. Next. And timed to each motion the accompaniment of the rich, hearty voice, like the sea-chanting of a deep-lunged sailor man. "How do you do?" (*Haul* the line on!) "*How* do you do?" (*Haul* the line on!) "Pleased to see you." (*This* is the way—) "Glad that you've come." (——to *haul* the line on.) Men with grievances. Boys with autograph books. Women with triplets. Children who would brag of how the President spoke to them. Old soldiers. Young home-girls. A college basketball team. A Kiwanis junket. Boyhood acquaintances. Aged crones who knew his father when—— Men, men, men. Women, women, women. Children, children, children. All just folks, happily responsive to the

broad beam of that unfailing smile, the warm tone of that unfaltering welcome. "How do you do." "How do you do!" (*This* is the way to *haul* the line on.)

The gripping and drawing muscles of his arm were like iron with a pulse. He could have pulled teeth with his unaided fingers as well as the itinerant dentist of the county fairs. Great idea! People were always worrying about what to do with ex-Presidents. Set 'em up as manual tooth-extractors. He chuckled, and an old gentleman who hadn't set eyes on him for forty years, and then only once, had a tale to tell for life of how Bill Markham was so glad to see him he laft right out loud. Yessir: remembered me the minute he laid eyes on me. A great big-hearted feller, the President. "How do you do!" "Glad to see you." "Yes. Yes. Delighted to see you." (*This* is the way—) And then a break in the rhythm as the Presidential smile faded and the Presidential eyes set and stared.

He had seen an unbelievable vision. There she stood in the midst of that rabble looking like—like—like a single, slender white iris in a field of dandelions. He tried to catch her eye, but she seemed to be helpfully answering some doubt of an old and feeble woman on her right. Expert in the estimate of pace he saw that it would be ten to twelve minutes before she would reach him. Meantime he must keep the line moving, keep his formula up to pitch, give a little, however infinitesimal, of himself, to all comers. (*This* is the way —to *move* the line on.)

Why had she come? Was she as eager to see him again as he to see her? Why had she not asked him to her house? Had something in his note been misinterpretable? Should he signal Frothingham to take her out of the line and make her comfortable in the private

office? How had she ever got into that lot, when she might—"Yes, yes." "Glad to see you." How do you do." (This is the way—to *shove* the line on.)

Now she had met his eye and given her slight, slow smile. In a moment she would be there with a good fourth of the line still back of her. He didn't care. He wasn't going to let her pass without a word. What if it did break the routine! The President of the United States could do as he pleased at his own reception, he guessed. Here she was—no; she had gently pushed before her the old woman who was snifflingly saying something— What?— Three sons— Oh, yes; three sons killed in the war. A great pity. Sympathy. Yes; yes; he understood her feelings; for the glory of the country. (Oh, for God's sake, move *on!*) Then the small, cool hand was in his grasp and the quiet, cool voice a formal murmur in his hungry ears. He said with jocund empressement;

"Comtesse D'A——"

"Not that, please. I'm Mrs. Westervelt."

Considerably relieved, for he had been far from sure of his pronunciation though he had practiced it in private, he said: "It's a great surprise to see you here."

"Is it? I came to see how you stood the ordeal."

"This? This is nothing."

"Solomon in all his glory."

"Wait a *minute,*" he pleaded. He had felt her gentle attempt at withdrawal. She smiled significantly down at his hand from which she could no more have detached her own than if it had been caught in Prospero's riven oak.

"I'm holding up the line."

"What's the difference?"

"Really, I must go on."

A broken-looking man of forty beside her was leaning toward the Presidential ear, muttering rapidly. His picturesque forlornness struck her. "I think he's trying to enlist your help."

"Yes; yes. . . . Sorry. . . . No; not here. . . . Never should have been admitted." The plaintive one was moved on. A voice behind Edith, anxious, eager, said; "Mr. Markham, I wrote you about a name for my dog."

"Please!" said Edith. "You're making me uncomfortable."

Instantly he released her. "You'll wait? Until this is over?"

"I think not to-day."

"You must. Please!" He signaled almost imperceptibly and the foot-ballish young secretary opened up the line and led her out.

"Come into this room, Mrs. Westervelt."

"You know me?"

"I met you at the Durrennes' in Baltimore. I'm Arthur Frothingham."

"I need a friend. Get me out of this dreadful place."

"You mean out entirely?"

"Entirely and immediately if you want to save my life."

"If *you* want to lose an aspiring young man his first job, make me do it. The President's instructions——"

"He couldn't have given you any about me. He didn't know I was coming."

"He doesn't have to give 'em in words. I'm supposed to know what he wants as soon as he wants it, or earlier. What do you think a secretary is for?"

"Then I'm to be held prisoner?"

"Oh, prisoner!" he deprecated. "The President so seldom wants anybody to stay." He added with ingenuous effrontery, "You must be of great political importance."

"I'm of no importance, political or otherwise, and I don't like being made conspicuous."

"Blame your ancestors," was the blithe retort.

Her annoyance dissolved in laughter. "Yours is an engaging sort of impudence. How long does this parade go on?"

"Almost over now."

"One would think he liked those people," she observed watching the kindliness, the glow, the unwearied welcome of the face.

"He loves 'em. Queer, isn't it?"

"Probably untrue."

"No. It's real with him. He says they are his kind of people."

"The Lincoln touch."

"Oh, be fair, Mrs. Westervelt. He doesn't pose."

"What is coming now?" A pleasurable murmur rustled the gathering.

"Good God! I believe he's going to make a speech."

"You seem dismayed about it."

"He has an address on for this afternoon. His voice will never stand it. I don't see what on earth——" His troubled eyes reverted to Edith Westervelt's face, and he stopped with a suppressed grunt. Evidently he did see. So did she.

Willis Markham was showing off. For her benefit.

At first she was attracted, ensnared by the rich beauty of the voice, the poise of manner, the confident command of his bearing, as well as sympathetic to what he was saying.

"Friends; it is kind of you to come and wish me well in my great task. I need your support. I need your faith, your help, your prayers." It was very simple and direct and quite touching. Then he caught her eye and squared away for a flight of oratory.

The beauty and skill of delivery were still there; the manner lost nothing of its assured charm. But what he said! All the old hokum, the smug banalities of a lifetime attuned to cheap and easy popularity were condensed into the next disastrous three minutes. "Popular government the inspiration of liberty." "Our heroic dead, the foundation rocks of our imperishable edifice." "Thrift and economy essential to prosperity." "The womankind of America, ever its glory and inspiration." "Business, the backbone of the nation." "Boost, don't knock. There is good in everybody." "The word, American, is the proudest boast of history." "Others may doubt; I have confidence in America." "Next to the Bible, I believe in the Constitution." "This republic of ours which has never feared an enemy——" Words, words, words. Phrases, phrases, phrases. Blah, blah, blah-blah.

"Does he do this often?" she asked Frothingham.

"Once or twice a month, maybe."

"Always the same?"

"Never twice the same. It means an effort."

"But it gains votes, I suppose."

"All these people would vote for him in any event. But they're crazy about it. That's why he does it. He ought not to put the extra strain on himself."

The voice rose to a climax, and was silent. There was a burst of spontaneous applause, long continued, from outside. Edith Westervelt felt dispirited.

"A ten-strike," commented the young secretary, gratified.

He rose as the door was darkened by a quick-moving figure. Willis Markham came in. The superb young giant drifted out and closed the door.

CHAPTER VIII

A PROFILE

MANY men had talked about themselves to Edith Westervelt. But never had she listened to an autobiography so artless, so naïve as Willis Markham's. It was more than a confession; it was a betrayal, unconscious and therefore the more complete. He sat there beside her and poured forth his soul in an ecstasy of revelation, with a trustful and touching assumption that she would find it of absorbing interest. This—he seemed to imply—is what you have been waiting to hear about all your life; this, my Career.

Thus was sketched out for her edification the Portrait of a President. The Markham political creed was neat and compact. It rested upon the fundamental assumption that the Party could do no wrong. The Party represented in the nation's ultimate intelligence, patriotism, and sanity, and was therefore the guaranty of its security, prosperity, and progress. Whatever was for the good of the Party must be for the good of the country. In that patriotic conviction, simple and sincere, he had gone on to victory.

"I have never voted against my Party in my life," he assured her.

"Then you don't think that loyalty can be overdone?"

He protested, shocked, as at a profanation. How could one overdo loyalty? It was the basic virtue. Any

man who didn't stand by his friends wasn't a man at all. He was a yellow dog. Why, where would you be if you couldn't bank on your friends? Nowhere. He, Markham, had the best, most loyal friends that ever a man was blessed with. If it hadn't been for them he could have never got where he was. Wonderful fellows: princes. She ought to know them. He'd like to have her meet them.

Not that a man's friends made him. He had to make himself. And Willis Markham indicated, without undue vainglory, that he had done a pretty good job. Politics was a tricky game, of course, but if a man went straight, stuck to his friends, avoided enemies, and when in doubt consulted the best minds of the Party and followed their advice, he could get most anything he went after. What did the country expect of a President, anyway? To direct its policies so that it should continue to be the richest, happiest, most prosperous country in the world. That was what he was elected for and that, so help him God, he was going to stand for, and let the demagogues yap. Business was satisfied, wasn't it? It ought to be; it had never been so prosperous in the history of the country. Business was the backbone of the nation. (Edith Westervelt here felt the dismayed misgiving that he might be slipping back into his oration.)

It was hard work being President; harder than he had thought. His former experiences had hardly prepared him for it. Being governor had been something of a job; nothing that a man couldn't get through in the day's stint, though. Being Senator was a cinch. But the Presidency took about all a man had and demanded more. Well, he wasn't afraid of it. His health was good, his body sound, his nerves steady.

He could stand anything but worry and he didn't intend to let the duties of the office get his goat. That's what wore presidents down and set them to throwing ink-wells and biting the carpet. (He gave his auditor a detail of a former President that appalled her.) No; you had to keep your nerve and your temper and play fair with all the elements of the Party, and hold the ship of state on an even keel, and there was your second term dead ahead and plain sailing. He added, in a deprecatory tone, that this was confidential. It was early yet to be thinking of a second term; early to be talking of it, anyway.

The drawback was that in the White House a man could never call his soul his own. There was no time for anything. People expected so much of you. Sometimes he felt like a jumping jack with a million wires on him. He couldn't even get away to have a quiet hour or two with his friends, except at the expense of other things waiting to be attended to. A man had to have *some* fun, some relaxation in life, or he'd crack. There were policies he wanted to work out too. He had ideas, important ideas, if he could ever find time to put them over. Ideas on world politics, on industrial relations, on taxation, on a Latin-American compact that would weld the Western hemisphere into one economic entity. But he hadn't ever studied these things deeply and now how was he going to find time? Still, it was a great asset to a President to have his name connected with an important policy.

Anyway, he was having the time of his life. There was a terrific kick to this President business. The things you could do for people! The opportunities of helping your friends. Why, there wasn't a day passed but that he was able to do favors for a lot of people,

make life happier for them, just by saying "Yes" or signing a letter. That was the big thing after all. He spoke with nervous elation, as if he must hasten to use his power of benefaction to the utmost. In the midst of it he gave a queer sort of chuckling laugh.

"Sometimes I think I am the happiest man alive," he said confidentially and with a measure of awe.

At that she had a blighting sense of futility, of pathos. In that hazy and narrow soul of a small-town politician, exalted to the summit of power, she had surmised self-destructive gleams of perception. Suppose he should one day open his eyes and see clearly his profound responsibilities, his limitless opportunities of service to a reckless and headlong nation, too dazzled by its own prosperity to estimate the perils of the nearing years? There was in him, amidst all the distended exaltation of his ego, a wistful, helpless yearning to do something useful. He would like to be a great President. Heaven help him, she thought, if he ever tried. And Heaven help the nation. But he wouldn't. It would all die out, stifled by the pressure of a thousand reiterated minutiæ. Better so.

What was he saying? He would send her a book of his life and speeches just out. Written by a young newspaper man, a friend of his at home. A splendid fellow; a prince. Of course, it was—er—well (he waved his hand) those things were always cooked up a little; but it would give her a general idea. He would autograph it. She thanked him and rose.

"You're not going," he protested.

"Don't you think you've kept me prisoner long enough?"

"Prisoner?" He looked startled. "You could have gone any time. Didn't you want to stay?"

"I've been very much interested."

"I had to talk with you."

Without any coquetry she said: "Did you? Why?"

"I get so everlastingly tired of all these people. All these things to do. I thought it would rest me to talk to you."

"Has it?" she said gently.

"Yes. And I didn't know how else I would have a chance. I didn't know whether you would give me a chance."

"There must be people waiting for you," she reminded him.

"Let 'em wait. The President is in conference. You are giving me inside information on—on the European situation."

"Does a President have to have excuses?"

"I'll say so! I keep one secretary for that purpose alone. . . . How did you like my speech?"

"I thought it was immensely successful."

The evasion satisfied him. "They ate it up, didn't they! Could you hear, in here?"

"Perfectly. But I couldn't hear what you were saying to the limpy little man who came up just after I left. I should like to have heard."

"Why? That wasn't of any importance."

"You looked so glad to see him."

At once his gaze became boyish, twinkly, as she had seen and liked it when he greeted the guests. "That was Zed Lowry. I asked him if he remembered the day he kicked the kid that was sucking a lemon in front of the bass horn at our band concert."

"Did you play in the band?"

"Snare drum. We took third prize at the State Fair one year."

With a peculiar intonation she said: "You must be what is known as a typical American."

At once he puffed out. "You couldn't call me anything that would make me prouder. . . . Mrs. Westervelt, why don't you come over to the White House for lunch? There'll only be three or four people there."

"I'm afraid I couldn't to-day."

"I'd like you to meet my niece. You'd like Burrl."

"Berle? What an odd name."

"Named after her great-aunt, Burrl Markham. I didn't think it was such an unusual name. After the precious stone, you know."

"Oh, Beryl," she said, enlightened. "I beg your pardon."

"Mrs. Hartley, you know. She's a widow. I'd like you and she to be friends."

"I'm afraid I don't make friends very easily."

"That's because you're shy, maybe," was the benevolent reply.

"Perhaps it's because I'm not really a friendly person."

"Don't say that!" he cried in real distress. "Don't even think it. A lady like you ought to have thousands of friends."

"But if a lady like me doesn't want them?"

"That beats me."

"It needn't. It means only that I do not take a highly enthusiastic view of humanity."

"You mean you don't like people?"

"Very much that."

"Not *any* people?"

"Oh-h-h—" The soft lift in her voice deprecated so complete an alienation from the world.

"I see. That's different. I'm just the other way. I like everybody and I want 'em to like me. It hasn't worked so badly," he finished complacently. "What are you smiling at now?"

"You recall to me what I had almost forgotten. I find it hard to realize that I am talking to the President."

"That's all right. Don't apologize."

Her brows quivered upward. "It wasn't exactly an apology. Perhaps it was a compliment."

"You won't come over and meet Burrl, just for a minute?"

"I should be delighted, some other time."

"Charley Madrigal will probably be there. There's a friend of mine you ought to meet. There's a lot of my friends I want you to meet. You'd like Charley." Willis Markham cherished a naïve and indestructible belief that people whom he liked would inevitably like each other. "You couldn't help but like him. Everybody does. He's a great jollier. And you ought to hear him on the platform. He was on that Southern trip with me and none of us ever knew that he could make a speech, when he was called on at a Chamber of Commerce banquet. What he did to that audience! He had the whole two thousand of 'em laughing one minute and crying the next, and eating out of his hand every minute. I love that boy! He gives good parties too. Small ones, but some of the biggest people go to them and mighty glad to get asked. You go to parties, don't you?"

"Sometimes."

"I suppose you'll be going to Sig McBride's Friday night. That's too big for me to take in. The President has all sorts of ropes on him."

"I don't know Mr. McBride or his sister."

"Let me get you an invitation. Sig's a great friend of mine. He's a prince."

"Now that you speak of it, I think I had a card. Funny habit they have of inviting people they don't know."

"What's the matter with that?" he inquired, amazed by the implication of her tone, which seemed to slur a house representing to his mind the social pinnacle. "I guess most folks are tickled to death to have a chance to go there. They're the richest people in Washington."

"Very likely," said she tolerantly. "As I say, I've never been there."

"Do you mean they aren't good enough for you?"

"Certainly not." She was a trifle impatient now. "They just happen to be in a different circle from the people I know. Very likely they're better."

"You don't mean that," he interpreted. "You aren't very democratic, are you!"

"It's one of my few virtues that I'm not."

"But you ought to be. Everybody ought to be. You can't be a real good American and not be. I've always believed in being democratic and I always will. Of course," he explained, lest she should misinterpret, "I don't mean being a Democrat in politics."

Openly annoyed now, she asked, "Do you always feel obliged to furnish diagrams to your friends?"

He caught at the final word. "We're going to be friends, aren't we? I can't tell you how much it means to me to have somebody I can talk to freely."

She was sensible of a response within herself to what was a direct claim upon her humanity, perhaps upon her femininity. But she was too much a woman

of the world not to realize that when a man makes an appeal to a woman "I need you," it is usually a preliminary to the ultimate declaration "I want you."

"When am I going to see you again?" he persisted.

She hesitated. From the moment of his astonished recognition she had guessed that she must either make this meeting a finis, or commit herself to uncharted adventure. But in what? In intrigue? In the diplomacy of politics? The governmental mechanism of her native country had inspired her only with a mild contempt. The aristocrat in her drew aside from that mélange of hypocrisy, mountebankism, and mob-emotion which are the more obvious motive forces of politics; and she lacked the experience to see beneath the surface to the subtler and finer counter-influences. On the other hand, the adventurous and pioneering elements in her blood urged her to the experiment of what she could do with Willis Markham. There was a certain risk attached to the enterprise. Publicity, perhaps, of a kind; even scandal; but she had never feared these. What had Peter Thorne said? That Willis Markham was a job for a combination political Machiavelli and early Christian martyr, and that such a combination was found only in woman-form. Was she the woman? Was the game worth it? Was the man worth it? In her short but immensely varied career she had encountered every type of ruling personality but this. He baffled her by his shortcomings, his unbelievable simplicities and banalities. And with it all, there was an undeniable attraction in the warmth and happiness of the man. With a tingle of excited nerves, rare in her self-controlled, self-decided existence, she said:

"My house is my house. Come when you like."

He stared. "You think I might?"

"Why not? If you care to."

"Care! But—there might be talk."

"If you're afraid of talk——"

"Only for you" (which was not the truth, though at the exalted moment he thought it so).

"I am not worried," she answered equably. "It is for you to decide."

He gripped her hand and left it benumbed when he relinquished it. "I know you can help me," he declared and left her to an amused and not quite conscience-comfortable conjecture as to how far his assumption of her altruism was justified.

The President of the United States was twenty-seven minutes late for an appointment with his Secretary of State. Marcy I. Sheldon, immaculate, intellectual, and austere lifted his eyes to the clock with a patient and martyred expression, and let them descend slowly to the face of his Chief. Normally, Willis Markham would have been perturbed, apologetic. Sheldon, with his marbled perfection of bearing, had a way of making him feel his own derelictions. But now he did not care a damn, and came perilously near telling his visitor so. All that he wanted was to get through the interview and put a question, which had been hovering at the back of his mind, to Beryl Hartley. For once the Secretary of State was balked of his usual satisfaction in meekly bullying his superior. What bullying was done was by the President. He almost turned Sheldon out.

Mrs. Hartley came bustling forth at her uncle's call. "Burrl, what was it that young whiffet of a British Secretary said at the dinner-party?"

"About what, Uncle Willis?"

"About Mrs. Westervelt."

"Oh! The Countess d'Aillys?" She rolled the title on her tongue, savoringly. "Why, as I heard it some one spoke of her as having a reputation for daring and Sir Wyndham said in that quaint way of his—you know he's awfully witty—he said, 'Daring? I should have supposed there was nothing left for her to dare.'"

Willis Markham frowned. "What did he mean by that?"

"Search *me*. Some kind of scandal, I suppose. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I thought you might go to see her sometime."

"I'd like to know her," said the other eagerly.

Scandal! The word stung and silenced him. In the revulsion from his own primary error about her, he had come to think of her as above all taint of tongue. "Nothing left for her to dare." What was the idea? That she had had adventures? Lovers, perhaps? How many? What kind? Kings and princes of Europe probably. How much of herself had she given them? Had she anything left to give to—to anyone?

What did it matter to him? For that one night and again for the hour of this noon she had symbolized release from pressure and routine. He breathed a lighter, more excitant air in her companionship. That was all right: why not? He wasn't in love with her. Love was a "sissy" sort of thing; all right for artists and poets and those kind of inconsiderable people who didn't even have votes. Or perhaps they did, but they didn't use 'em. How Lurcock and Gandy and the whist party crowd would razz him at the very hint of such a thing. Their idea of women was severely

practical like their idea of politics but they had never met a woman like Edith Westervelt. Tim Fosgate had met her and had been impressed; old, reliable, matter-of-fact Tim.

Markham sought for a phrase to hold her by and found it with exultation, though not at first. Restfulness. Serenity. The serenity of power in repose. Yes; but there was something more. Secret splendor. That was it. She had a sort of secret splendor.

CHAPTER IX

THE CHARMER

In his suite at the Willard, Charles M. Madrigal was making a careful toilet. His hair, subjected to insistent pressure, shone glossily over the exaggerated dome of his head. His necktie was adjusted to a nonchalant loop, and he was manipulating the bar-pin which held his soft collar in form with the particularity of the soaring but conscientious spirit to which perfection is the sum of precious details. From his flabby, freshly shaven face his eyes bulged eagerly. They were the large, moist eyes of self-indulgence. His lips, too, were protuberant and pulpy, bespeaking the cheery sensualist. He was large, blond, well-framed, gross-fleshed and carried himself with a jaunty resiliency. He was like a huge cork bouncing merrily upon the favoring ripples of a happy existence.

"Cocktail, Harold," he ordered, and chuckling at his pretty play of fancy, threw one together from an array of bottles in the bathroom.

Having swallowed this and its little brother, he took the elevator, and stepped out to the curb, where a monster sport-model, too conscious of its superiority to glitter, was waiting. He seated himself at the wheel.

"The White House, Marmaduke." He gave himself the order and started the car. Some day, not far distant, there would be a Harold to mix his drinks and a Marmaduke to drive his car. Meantime things were going very well with Mr. Madrigal.

The car seemed incapable of a meaner pace than forty miles an hour. Up crowded Pennsylvania Avenue Madrigal drove with the elegant insouciance of one to whom the earth and the fullness thereof pertain as of right. Turning in for the White House gate he temporarily disrupted traffic and forced a cursing taxi driver up on the curb.

"That's new stuff, brother," he commented, appreciating the man's lingual efforts to express his spiritual turmoil.

He parked the example of modest grandeur beside the main entrance, and sauntered up the steps with an air of habitude, well founded, scattering largesse of friendly speech about him.

"Hello, Stan." "Nice morning, Hilton." "How's the boy, Con?" "Thanks, George," to the negro who took his hat and cane. "Hope you took my tip on the third at Alexandria. She came through."

Unattended, a high mark of privilege, he turned down the broad hallway, north, made another short turn and found the door of the private elevator closed. A middle-aged man stepped into his path.

"Oh, it's you, is it?"

"It's me, all right. How's Old Cap, the guardian angel?"

The major domo, who looked like a handsome elderly Puritan, ministered to by a high-grade, modern tailor, moved aside without reply, as the visitor added, "I'll walk," and sprang up the stairs.

In the official's long tenure of office, not fifty people, all told, had enjoyed unannounced access to that stairway. He wondered, shrewdly, how long Charles Madrigal would practice it. Not long, he thought.

From the stair top Madrigal walked confidently

down the hall to the private presidential apartments. At the third door he knocked and whistled.

"Come in," said a merry voice. Determinedly merry and arch.

He obeyed with alacrity. A buxomish woman came toward him, smiling coyly.

"Hello, Duchess."

"Oh, *hel*-lo." Fluttering, she smoothed down her skirt in front as if it were an apron, then remembered that this was one of the hundred things never done and wriggled uncomfortably.

"How's the Beautiful One to-day?"

Self-conscious, but unable to deny the charge, she murmured, "Oh, Charley!"

Beryl Hartley, widowed niece of the President and mistress of the White House, was vain as only blondes, fighting the approach of forty can be. To a connoisseur her caller's flattering attribution might have seemed exaggerated. True, the eyes were quite lovely, large, broad-set and blue, with a dreamy expression due partly to myopia, partly to bewilderment as to what it was all about, but none the less effective; "beautiful but dumb." The flaxy hair went well with the eyes, and the small, pursed mouth with its peevish softness was not without seduction. But for the rest of the face, Nature had drawn a blank.

Madrigal flipped her shoulder with a comradely hand. "How about a li'l highball, Duchess? Just you and me; eh?"

"Why, sure, Charley. Certainly, I mean." She bustled into nervous activity. "I'll get it myself."

"Sit you back into your seat, Busy Bee. Guess I know the ropes here."

"You ought to if anybody does."

One of the few innovations of a régime sanctified to a traditional normalcy was a small and handy ice-box just off the living room. To this Madrigal repaired and presently returned with two glasses deeply amber. "I suppose I ought not to," sighed the lady. "But I've had *such* a hard day."

"What's wrong, Duchess?"

"Nothing, specially. I've got so much to do I just don't know where I'm *at*. . . . Charley, how do you begin a letter to a lady you never met?"

"Why, I'd begin it, 'Hello, peaches,' or something like that to establish the entente cordiale."

"Aren't you awful! This is a special invitation."

"Let your social secretary do it. What's she for?"

"Uncle Willis wants me to write this personally."

"Ye-ah?" said Madrigal in surprise. "What's struck Billy the Prex?"

"I don't know. I never saw him like this before."

"Who is the dame, anyway?"

"She's a countess, but she doesn't use the title."

"Phony, huh?"

"No, indeed! She's turribly swell, I hear."

"Well, if she don't use her monicker there's something queer about it. Some of these Roumanian title are quoted about the same as Russian roubles. What does she call herself?"

"Mrs. Westervelt. Lives on Marquette Circle. Do you know her?"

"Haven't met her yet," he answered confidently. "I know of her, though." He devoted himself to a swift-reckoning line of thought which found outlet in the query; "What do you hear from the Missus?"

"Aunt Sara Belle?" The flaxy head shook mourn-

fully. "Nothing good. It's my belief she'll never come out alive.

"Then you'll have to run this little shack permanently."

"I suppose so," she sighed elaborately. "It's a turrible strain. I get so tired of it." But the telltale mouth smirked.

Madrigal thought to himself; "If I had any guts I'd cinch this thing right here and now. What price bed and board in the White House for Cholly! She'd fall for me like a ripe pippin." The drawback was a wife in the background. Probably she could be bought off, and then——. He looked at Beryl Hartley's expressionless features, her stale skin, the simper of a supreme self-satisfaction on her face, and his thoughts, suddenly bright and truant, flew elsewhere. He recalled them with an inward curse. He'd have to see what could be done about it.

"Did you speak to Bill about that matter?"

"Which is that?"

"The family property out West."

"Oh, yes! He'll leave it all in my hands. Says he can't be bothered with details; he's got more on his mind than he can carry now. It's a shame the way they pile things on him, and he's too good-natured to kick."

"Yes, too bad," agreed the other vaguely. "We've got the transfer all fixed," he added.

"What transfer?"

He repressed an exclamation of disgust. It took at least three repetitions to get anything fixed in that gummed-up brain of hers. "The land trade. If you'll sign these papers I'll send out there and close it up."

"Is that all I have to do?"

"That's all just now."

"And you say it's all right?"

"Posilootly."

"Now," said Madrigal after her scrawly signature was affixed, "I've got a little secret to tell you."

"Is it a nice one?"

"I'll say it is. What do I get for it?"

"We-ell, if it's a *very* nice one——"

"Guaranteed the best. Payment in advance."

He bent over her upraised face. It was she who clung the longer in their embrace. "Now tell me," she said in a slightly choky voice.

"I've told you that this was going to be worth fifty or sixty thousand a year to Bill."

"Poor Uncle Willis! He certainly needs it. Money is another of his worries."

"Well, it means a nice little easy seven or eight thou' per year in your own kick."

"Me? Oh, Char-ley! Come back here and let me kiss you again!"

"Look out!" he warned, inwardly thanking his stars for a sound in the adjoining room. "Somebody's coming."

The door opened and the President of the United States appeared. His face was flushed, harassed, weary. At sight of the visitor it lighted up.

"Hello, Charley. How's the boy?"

"Hello, Bill. Fine."

"Hello, Burrl."

"Hello, Uncle Willis. How are you feeling?"

"Like hell is what I'd say if there weren't ladies present. What you got there, Charley? Highball? Mix me one, will you?"

"Surest thing you know."

"And put some kick in it. I want to get the taste of Sheldon out of my mouth."

"Cabinet meeting to-day?" asked the improvisatore barkeep through the open door and above the scrunch of ice.

"Private conference. Europe! Europe! Europe! What the hell do I care about Europe! I'm an American."

"Sure," soothed his sympathetic friend. "That's the Honorable Susan's business. What does he think he's Secretary of State for? He's the guy that gets the credit."

"Let him have it and welcome. All I want is to be let alone." Gratefully he took the long drink from the ministering hand. "Thanks, Charley. Ah-h-h-h-h! That's the stuff!" He added, somberly reflective. "I don't suppose any poor devil of a President ever had such a highbrow Cabinet wished on him. Gandy and poor old Hambidge are the only human beings in it. Covert plays a swell hand of bridge; I'll say that for him. But when it comes to any other association he's about as gay as a plaster dove. You know, those fellows don't like me any better than I like them. I was all set to like them, too," he concluded plaintively.

"What d'you mean, don't like you, Bill?" protested his friend.

"No; that's right. They're very polite and always consulting me. 'Mr. President this; Mr. President that; What are the President's views on the subject? But inside they think I'm just a cheap skate of a lucky politician. And that goes for Sheldon and Covert and Maxson and most of the rest of them."

"Chuck 'em out. You can get just as good and better among your own friends that you can trust."

It was by no means beyond the range of Madrigal's ardent dreams to see himself Secretary of War or of the Navy though he wasn't so sure that there'd be much chance of outside money in it.

"No. I'm stuck with them. There'd be the devil to pay in the Party if they got out. Oh, it's all right," said the other with an effortful smile. "I'm a little tired, that's all. Haven't been sleeping so well lately."

"You worry too much, Uncle Willis."

"It's a worrisome job. Sometimes I think if a second term was handed to me on a silver plate I'd pass it up cold."

"You'll have to take it, Bill. The Party will demand it. So will the country."

"It isn't the picnic I thought it was going to be, though."

"You work too hard at it."

"I don't work hard enough to keep up with what's shoved on me. Conferences and calls and advice about appointments and requests and what are we going to do about the situation in Kentucky and won't I decide which faction is regular in Rhode Island and will I make a speech here and can they count on me for a dedication there and— Well, if it wasn't for you and Dan and Tim and the old gang and our little parties I couldn't stand the gaff. A man's got to have some let-up."

"You said it, Bill. Have another li'l one. Come on."

"Just one. Then I've got to trot back. See you tonight?"

"I'm liable to drop in during the evening."

"Well, don't bring along any tainted money," said Markham with his rich chuckle.

"What about these whist parties of yours?" queried Beryl as the door closed behind her uncle.

"You tell me and I'll tell you," sparkled Madrigal.

She smiled her appreciation of his unfailing flow of wit. "Are they very gay?"

"Sober as a church sociable."

"Don't you think—perhaps—maybe—Uncle Willis is drinking a good deal?"

"Never saw him pickled in my life. Not even jingled. He's got a head like a pine knot. You wouldn't want to crab what little fun he gets out of things, would you?"

"No-o-o-o. But— You've been fumbling at your watch for ten minutes. If you want to go why don't you go?"

"Aw, Duchess!" he said reproachfully. "You know I never want to leave you. But I've got to get these papers filed by 4:30 o'clock, so I'd better be stirring onward. I remain yours regretfully, Cholly of the Changeless Heart."

Down in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, another and a slenderer neck than plump Beryl's had been craning toward the time. Little Zoa Farley had made four errors in three-quarters of an hour, which was a record even for her. Her mind was divided between her approaching date and the laggard clock. Her immediate superior said something sharp about the third mistake, and she smiled penitently but securely. She was too pretty to lose her job, a wisp of a red-haired, red-lipped child with a tired, tinted face and eyes of unsleeping passion.

At 4:30 o'clock she rose from her desk with a composed languor and without any effort of haste was first out of the door, leaving her derelictions to the un-

failing correction of time. Out upon the sidewalk she joined that close flux of femininity which, five afternoons and one noon a week, pours out from this and a score of other governmental bureaus made and provided for the sisters, nieces, cousins, aunts, widows, and other female dependents of senators, congressmen, and lesser office-holders; a kindly provision less hampered by civil service examinations and rules than an outsider might suppose. There are ways around. There are always ways around in Washington. Most of these incumbents are but little more than mechanisms in the form of women, dowdy robots of the official routine. But here and there the discerning eye may note a brighter sister, who, by the exercise of arts other than economy, contrives an eight-hundred-dollar fur coat on a stipend of thirty dollars per week. These are the hetairæ of our modern Athens, sponsored by some rich jobholder, or millionaire freebooter on the wide seas of big politics. What they know about Washington would make written history look pale and flat. But they do not tell, or, if they do, nobody believes them. Meantime they hold their jobs as an asset to themselves and a smoke-screen to the reputation of their protectors.

Zoa Farley was no robot. She belonged to the brighter sisterhood, though not yet a full-fledged member.

Turning to the right with half of the split stream of workers, she diverged from it after half a block of travel and cut through the grounds of the Agricultural Department, past the Bureau of Entomology (whose hard-worked Chief, a year later would put in a day's research checking up on one of her light-hearted errors)

and rounded the corner of the rusty brick castle beyond. There she stopped, her eyes staring almost affrightedly into the bland smile of Mr. Charles M. Madrigal, her heart beating in her throat.

"Well, honey-bug?" said Mr. Madrigal, savoring richly her amazement.

"Wh—where did that car come from?"

"You tell me and I'll tell you," he retorted brightly.

"Is it *yours?*"

"I'll tell the cock-eyed world it is. Yours, too, any time you want to use it."

"Oh, Mr. Madrigal!"

"Charley to you, if you want to ride in this bus."

"Cholly," she murmured, and added, "It's the yummiest thing I ever saw."

"There's more where it came from," he stated. "Get in."

"I feel like a million dollars in this," she declared obeying his direction.

"You look like ten million to me." The superb car moved off with a start so smooth that it seemed almost surreptitious.

"Oh, Mr. Madrigal—Cholly! Could I drive it, do you think?"

"Sure. When we get out in the country."

"The country? Where are we going?" she asked doubtfully.

"Out to where this car came from."

They swept down Pennsylvania Avenue at reckless speed. But the officers on duty either looked the other way or smiled a greeting.

"Friends of mine, all of 'em," he explained in blithe disregard of her alarm. "Nothing short of murder would ever get me pinched."

"How do you do it?" she murmured.

"I've got this town going, little one."

Across the Maryland line he swung into a country road and abandoned the control of the car to her. For half an hour she drove, in an excited ecstasy.

"It's too wonderful!"

"What do I get for it?"

She slipped into his arms for a long, close kiss.

"I'll take you on as permanent chuffer," he laughed.

"Be good," she admonished, restoring her jaunty hat to normalcy. "We don't own this road."

"I'll show you something I pretty near do own when we get around that next turn," he asserted.

A slight rise brought them to a view of grouped buildings, teeming with activity. Trucks came and went. Freight cars on a railroad siding were being loaded and hauled away to make room for fresh supplies. Gangs of men hauled, and lifted, and sweated and shouted. Above it all a clock in a squat brick tower moved black hands around a white face.

"See that clock?" indicated the cicerone.

"Yes. It's got an ugly face."

"It's got a grand face," he repeated indignantly. "And it works—oh, girlie!"

"What's so wonderful about it?"

"Every time it strikes, a twenty dollar bill comes out of the hopper and waits for me to come along and stack it up."

"I hope it strikes the half hours," said Zoa flippantly.

"Don't believe me, do you, sweetpickle?"

"That'd be nearly five hundred dollars a day." She had made a ready reckoning. "Try me with an easier one."

"That's about the rake-off."

"Do you mean it?" She looked at him, breathless, and perceived that he did. "I don't understand."

"I'm going to tell you. That's how much I think of you, birdie."

It was one of the touching characteristics of the Madrigal character that when he had once got a girl, it was his instinct to trust her as part of himself. He could not believe that she might be unfaithful to him or to his interests, such was his confidence in the compelling power of his personality. Experience had justified him in this creed; besides which he esteemed himself a shrewd judge of women. He had not yet got little Zoa, but he confidently meant to have her. That was why he had brought her here, to display for her subjugation the peacock-hues of his power, his wealth, his success.

"What is this place?"

"It was a hospital unit. Now it's a clearing house. Do you read the political news?"

"There ain't much you can tell me about inside politics," said she pertly.

"Atta girl! You know about the newly organized Department of Public Health."

"Sure."

"Well, the Secretary is a good pal of mine."

"I was on a party with him once when he was in the Senate. He's an old stiff."

"Now, listen, kid! I'm talking about business, not road-house stuff. He's there every minute when it comes to action. The first thing he did in the Department was to get all the Army and Navy and the Public Health Service hospital equipment turned over to him."

"Yes; and it pretty near started something."

"You do know some things that don't get in the papers, I guess," he admitted admiringly. "It's all settled now, though. The President was back of Gandy and that put a gag on the beefers. Well, a lot of the Army and Navy stuff was old and unfit, so Gandy condemned it and offered it for sale. I'm in charge of the selling end."

"What does that get you?"

"Recognition," he chuckled. "Business men—the kind I deal with—recognize a friendly act when it's done for them. I've got a side-kick named Forrest. Know him?"

"Is he the one with the dark, pretty wife? I used to see you out with her, before I knew you."

"Well, you won't see me out with her any more, now that I know you," he returned seductively. "Forrest is a wise guy. He used to do a line of high-class bootlegging. I got him out of that and gave him a safer job, going around on the quiet to see the big contractors that handle hospital supplies, fabrics and so on, and find out if we couldn't deal. We could."

"Thought those things were handled by competitive bidding."

"So they are. But there's ways of fixing that, between friends. At the price we gave 'em they made such a profit that they could afford to split."

"And that comes to you?" she said awe-struck at the magnitude of the operation which her shrewd little brain grasped.

"Not all of it. Some of it goes higher up—what do you think Gandy took the job for?—and there are other cuts. But I stand to clean up a hundred grand on this job alone. After which we pitch camp in another spot."

He had helped her out of the car and they walked down into the bustle. Right and left, men saluted Madrigal, who replied with beaming good fellowship, jollying them along. At one point, a box, fallen from a truck, had broken open, spilling out upon the ground fold upon fold of suave white. Zoa Farley stooped over and fingered the fabric expertly.

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"I thought you said the turned-over stores were old, condemned stuff."

"Sure, they're condemned or we couldn't sell them."

"These sheets look factory-new."

"Do they?"

"Yes; and I believe they are."

He winked. "Well, so much the better for the buyers, ain't it? You've got to look out for your friends if you want your friends to look out for you."

"But aren't you building new hospitals?"

"We will be. I'll be in on that too, when the time comes."

Her small, bright face was puckered in thought. "They'll need equipment, won't they?"

"Right, honeybunch."

"This stuff that you're handling here: why wouldn't that do for the new hospitals?"

Again he winked. "Well maybe some of it went astray and got mixed up with the condemned material. You can't help *some* mistakes occurring."

"That's right. How much do you get for these sheets?"

"Thirty-seven cents."

"Cholly Madrigal! Why I can't buy that quality for less than a dollar-forty."

"Well, that's all right. You don't buy in hundred gross lots."

"No. But even at that it's scandalous."

"Well, don't get sore," he laughed. "You aren't losing anything. That's only a small part of it. There are towels and pillows, mops, soap, cots, dental equipment, mosquito bars, electrical supplies; it would take an hour to go through the list."

"Is it all as good as this?"

"Oh, no! We've got a lot of damaged and time-stained stuff to show, if any Congressional sniffing committees come poking around here. But they won't. Gandy's too strong. And the Old Man's a good friend of mine, too. They won't get anything past him."

"Does he know about this?"

"The President? God, no! At that I don't know as he'd be sore at one of his pals getting a cut out of the melon. He put me over on Gandy and he certainly wouldn't expect me to live on the salary."

"I hear you're very much next, there."

"It's Charley and Bill with us," he returned with modest pride.

"How did you get so close to him?"

"Down in Havana, before anybody ever thought of him as president. He was there on a Senatorial junket. I'd heard he was a good scout, and liked a party once in awhile, so I organized one, and met him on the boat with it all framed up. Did he bite? I'll say he did. Before the week was out we were thicker than Mutt and Jeff. When he was nominated, I showed up at the Corners and told him he needed somebody like me to handle the cozy end of the home campaign while he was doing the high hat in front. He almost kissed me. Once a pal, always a pal with Old Bill. He's the real stuff."

"How about your other White House pal?"

He grinned. "Isn't the President enough?"

"The dirt is that you're going to marry her."

"Listen, kid, and put this in your book. I'm not marrying any one. Any one—get me? Couldn't if I wanted to. I'm still tied."

"Well, don't get sore."

"Sore? At you?" He gave her his beamy smile. "I should say not, kid. I think too much of you for that. Say, how would you like to transfer to my department?"

"What would the job be?"

"You'd rate a clerkship. But you'd really be my private secretary. I've got to have some one there that knows the inside of the game. I've spread it all to you. Somebody I can trust to look after my interests twenty-four hours a day; and I'd fix it so that my interests would be your interests. Sort of a sleeping partnership. See?" he murmured ingratiatingly.

She regarded him with unwavering, understanding eyes. A nervy kid! Not afraid of the cars. "I'll think it over," said she.

"That'll be all right."

"Yes—I guess—that'll be all right," she said measuredly.

As they reached the city limits she remarked:

"I hear the President's got a new sweetie."

He was startled. "Where do you get that?"

"Oh, I don't know. There's always a lot of dirt floating around the departments. Who is she, do you know?"

He recovered enough to take refuge in his formula. "You tell me and I'll tell you."

"I didn't hear her name. Some society dame. They

say she's a good looker and that the old boy has fallen for her harder than she has for him."

"Is it likely!" he retorted contemptuously. "I guess the President of the United States don't have to ask for anything twice. Anyway, that's not his game. He's a man's man. He's never done any skirt-chasing. It's the bunk, that story."

"Maybe," she said indifferently. "He's certainly a good looking guy, and he's got a smile that would set me reaching for the thermometer if he ever turned it on me. It must be swell to know those people."

Madrigal appeared to be absorbed in driving. There was a pause. Then:

"Cholly."

"What's on your mind, little one?"

"Take me to the White House sometime?"

"Surest thing you know."

She nestled up to him. "I think you're pretty wonderful, ol' boy-friend."

"You treat me right and I'll treat you right."

But Charles Madrigal had not the slightest intention of taking his little Zoa to the White House. He did not believe in mixing his drinks or his women.

CHAPTER X

A GIFT FROM A LADY

"AUTOBIOGRAPHY," said Edith Westervelt "is sometimes less complete than biography."

Senator Peter Thorne carefully set down the fragile tea-cup of the famous Westervelt china. "You've arrived at personal and confidential terms with him already," he inferred.

"He's a very personal person," she murmured, adding, "He's sent me a book about himself. Autographed. Including his speeches. Underscored."

Peter Thorne grinned. "He would."

"Written by a young and worshipful newspaper friend. A regular fellow. A prince. There seem to be a great many princes in the Presidential entourage. Are you a prince, Peter?"

"Not so honored. Are you a princess?" He bit his lip. This was farther than he had intended to go."

"I suppose I might be if I played my cards right. But," she sighed, "I'm so lacking in a proper ambition."

"Then what are you playing this game for?"

"You shall go down in history as Peter the Ungrateful. Didn't you urge me to?"

"I've changed my mind."

"For 'Ungrateful' substitute 'Unstable.' Why?"

"I had not given sufficient thought to the personal

element. And apparently you have found the man himself interesting."

"Do you consider him dull?"

"From the viewpoint of a woman like yourself, I should think he might be."

"He isn't. He has all the components of dullness and boringness to the *n*th degree. But he's neither dull nor boring. Perhaps it's because he's so superbly happy."

"He ought to be. Life has been his Christmas tree."

"Or is it because my weak womanhood is dazzled by the splendor of his position?" she pursued. "*Am* I that kind of vulgarian, Peter?"

He laughed shortly. "Were you ever dazzled in your life, Edith?"

Yes. Once," she said abruptly, and the loveliness of her face darkened. "I shall never be again. We're not talking about me, though, Peter. We're talking about his Excellency, the President of the United States who does me the honor to wish me to be his friend."

"There are friendships and friendships. This one would be difficult, I should say. It might even be dangerous."

"To me?"

"For the moment, I was thinking of him. And he has dangers enough around him already, though he is blissfully unconscious of them."

"If I'm an added peril, tell him so. He is due here in five minutes."

"Here! Does he come here?"

"Why not?"

"No reason at all. I beg your pardon."

"*Il n'y a pas de quoi.* Or perhaps there *is* reason. You seemed quite objectionably shocked."

"Not in the least," he disclaimed. "But I think I won't play chaperone to your visit. The secret service attendants will be sufficient for that."

"More than sufficient," she laughed. "Propriety officially certified."

With some surprise, Willis Markham, ascending the high, formal, balustraded steps of the old house, met Peter Thorne coming down. He had not known that Thorne was a friend of Mrs. Westervelt. But what did he know of her friends? She had revealed nothing of herself to him. Perhaps in her own home she would be less reticent. Only the most casual greeting passed between the two men.

"Good afternoon, Mr. President."

"How are you, Senator?"

Usually President Markham would have stopped to exchange brief views with a senator of his own party: but he was all eagerness to reach his destination. Already in the vestibule the charm of the place enfolded him. Entry to that house was like to coming into an inner life of spaciousness, coolness, repose. The environment had taken on the personality of its central figure. Willis Markham was not a highly sensitized person, but beneath that roof he was conscious of strange currents which lapped him in peace without conveying to him their whispered meanings. Washington lay outside the enchanted walls, a hurly-burly of demands, pressures, torsions, and blatant intrigue. Here was rest and—and what else? Edith Westervelt. But what was Edith Westervelt to him? What could she imaginably be? The door opened and the inscrutable, untranslatable answer to his question

seemed to materialize out of soft shadows and quietude before his eyes.

As on both former meetings he was struck by the ease, the poise, the fineness of every motion. The even, sweet pallor of her skin was unheightened as she came forward with her hand outstretched: her eyes were quiet, unfathomable but, he thought, friendly. There was less of scrutiny, interrogation, surmise in them than before: more of personal acceptance.

"How do you get away at this hour?" she asked.

"Playing hookey. I've dodged a meeting. Sore throat. I've just been pinning medals on heroes. Have one?"

"For what should I qualify?"

"Distinguished service in time of peace," said he neatly. He had led up to that, thinking it all out before his arrival with as much care as he gave to an address, and was rather pleased with it.

"In what respect?" she asked lazily.

"To an overworked President in need of relaxation."

"You get too much enjoyment out of it to be tired. Happiness is the greatest tonic in the world. Which sounds like Dr. Frank Crane."

"Do you think I'm happy?"

"As happy as a child. The happiest person I've ever known. It's your chief charm."

"Why wouldn't I be!" he exulted. "I've got everything I've ever gone after."

She shook her head. "A dangerous boast."

"I didn't mean to boast."

"You might be forgiven if you did."

"You think it's cheap, don't you?" he said with unexpected perspicuity.

"What?" She was playing for time.

"All this. The whole game. Politics."

"Not if you find in it the satisfaction you're looking for."

"Certainly I do. Except——"

"Well? Except——

"Except when I'm with you. You give me a different slant on things."

"Not consciously."

"No, no. Not by saying anything. You don't say much. Do you?"

"Is that a reproach?"

"Well," he answered a little aggrievedly: "when I'm with you I blatt out everything I know. And you—I don't even know what you think."

"I try not to think."

"Do you? Why?"

"What is there to think about?"

This shocked him. "You don't mean that."

"Don't I? Probably I don't. I often say what I don't mean. Set it down to laziness."

He shook his head. "No," he said earnestly. "I don't believe that either. Do you know what I like about you? Your straightness. I don't believe you ever dodge. I have a lot of lies told me and a lot more stuff that's half lies and half straight. I like to think there's one person I can bank on to stand for the truth."

"Don't overestimate me," she warned, a little troubled.

"I don't," he retorted ardently. "I know you. Not as well as I want to, but I know you. Sometimes you have me going, for a minute, like saying that there's nothing worth thinking about. Even then, though,

I guess I get you. A fellow does have that feeling when he's tired out. Every one has their ups and downs."

"You don't, do you?"

"Don't I!" He chuckled. "Would it surprise you if I told you that I once thought seriously of suicide?"

"It would astound me."

"It's a fact, though. Things had been going wrong, and it looked like the cards were stacked against me, and the game was no good, and you didn't get anywhere, and what was the use. Guess I must have eaten too many hot dogs the night before. Wouldn't it have been a joke, though, if I had done it!"

"Would it? I confess I don't see the humor."

"If I'd done it and then could have looked forward twenty years and seen where I was going to land?" His grin invited, even urged her participation in the good thing. "I'll say the joke would have been on me."

"I can't imagine you even considering it."

"Oh, well! I probably never would have done it, anyway. Though I did get out the old gun and looked her over."

"That wouldn't be my way."

His laugh was almost a guffaw. "Your way! That's a good one. I can't see you quitting the game."

Perversely, she became annoyed and contradictious. "Why not?"

He perceived that she was, to some degree at least, in earnest. His amusement fell away from him, leaving his aghast. "Why, a lady like you; you wouldn't do a thing like that. Your joshing, aren't you?"

He leaned forward and touched her knee. There was no familiarity in the gesture, only anxiety. Her eyes shifted to meet his; there was faint irony in

them. "Did you ever notice the instructions on the theater programs: 'Look for the nearest exit?'"

"Theater? I don't think I get you."

A little impatient she said: "Well, when there's no other way out, it's always an exit, isn't it?"

"Oh, I see." He stared at her, still a little baffled. "Well, what's your way?" he asked with a certain shrinking bravado. He didn't really want to know. The thought of suicide in connection with this exquisite and desirable creature revolted him.

"Much nicer and less mussy than yours. One develops certain symptoms and, after some immediate discomfort, dies a week or so later, without fuss or scandal."

This time he understood. "Poison!"

She nodded.

"But you wouldn't really do it."

"Of course not." But this was mockery.

"I—I—don't believe— Do you keep it by you?"

"There's probably some about the place."

"Then you *are* figuring on it."

"What does it matter what one figures on? So many other elements enter. Do you believe in free will?"

"I remember something about it in the catechism," said he vaguely.

"What I mean is that our intentions don't really form or control our lives. Did you intend to be President?"

"Certainly I did. All the time."

"Not when you 'got out the old gun.'"

"We—ell, no. But after I got my start, I did."

"Tell me about the start." She was leading him away from the troubling topic.

His version did not differ from Peter Thorne's except in the angle. It gave all due credit to Lurcock. Dan was a prince, a wonder, the best friend any man ever had. There followed a panegyric upon friendship as the greatest thing in life. Some of the highbrow politicians seemed to think that a man ought to ditch his friends when he got up in the world. They made him sick, those fellows. What difference could it make to the country who a man's friends were as long as he lived up to the responsibilities of his office?

He leaned forward to her, touched her hand. "Sometimes this thing of being President scares me," he said in a stilled voice. "It's so big. It gathers like a shadow over you and in front of you and you get afraid. There are a hundred million people looking to me to keep things going right. Suppose some crisis should come up and I made a break and everything went wrong and the people lost their confidence in me. God! I tell you, it gets into my dreams sometimes." His face had become haggard and somehow finer; a sort of dim ennoblement. "It isn't the work that breaks down Presidents," he added with conviction. "It's that weight of carrying the trust and confidence and well-being of your country."

She said simply; "I like you, Willis Markham."

"Do you?" he cried with a sudden flush.

"I like you so much better than your speeches. So much better than anything in that book about you."

"I don't see why. That's just as much me as what I've been saying. More so. It's only once in a while that I get down in the mouth. My job is to keep this country the biggest and happiest and most prosperous in the world, and as long as I can do that, I guess we'll

all be happy. That's what they elected me for by the biggest majority any President ever got, and that's what I've got to live up to."

"You're making a success of it, aren't you."

"Do you think so?" he said eagerly.

"The public thinks so," she evaded.

Easily satisfied, he stated his conviction. "You can always trust the American people to judge right in the long run. If a man keeps himself a thick-and-thin American I guess he can't go far wrong." He mused momentarily over that glorious thought, then, with an altered address, said quickly; "I'm glad you said that you liked me, because I—I wondered if you would do something for me."

"I should think it not unlikely."

"Let me see that poison of yours."

"Put it out of your mind," she said lightly.

"Let me look at it," he insisted.

She shrugged her shoulders, rose, left the room and returned with a small phial containing blue pellets, which she placed in his hand. "You'd probably find one in every other house in Washington."

"But not for that purpose. Will you give me this?"

"How silly! I could get another to-morrow in any drug store."

"Yes. But you won't, will you?"

"Probably not to-morrow. Probably not any day. Set down what I said to the cheap desire to be dramatic for once."

"No. You couldn't be cheap or—or fakey. I want you to promise. I can't bear leaving that damn thing within your reach."

"You are asking much."

"I need much from you."

"Be careful. You don't know how little I have to give."

"You can help me. I need your help. You mean so much to me. You mean inspiration (Of course! She had known he would say that!), and rest, and—and something that I can't get anywhere else in the world but from you."

"You're appealing to my vanity."

"Have you any? I hope you have."

"Why?"

"Because that would mean that you still have an interest in things, and so that bottle is no use to you. Do I get it? Is it a deal?"

"To what am I committing myself if I say yes?"

"You're promising not to—not to do anything without giving me a chance to see you first."

She smiled, somberly but indulgently as if upon an importunate but engaging child. "Take it."

"Thanks," he said with emotion.

He dropped it in his pocket and went away, triumphantly possessed of what was surely as strange a guerdon as ever knight bore for love of his lady.

CHAPTER XI

OIL

THE philanthropic design for a needed addition to the President's income worked out without the beneficiary's knowledge. In its perfected form it rose, hazy like a djinn, out of an ice-packed bottle set between the Honorable Anderson Gandy and the less officially (though perhaps not less actually) Honorable Daniel Lurcock, in the room where the whist parties were held. Such a party was set for that midnight, but the two profound and kindly statesmen had anticipated it by an hour and were now in conference.

"Everything's fixed," announced Lurcock.

"Isn't it risky?" queried his companion.

"Safe as the monument. All you have to do——"

"Me? Why do I always have to be the goat?"

The other overbore him with his heavy glare. "You make me sick," he pronounced. "You're not getting anything out of this administration, are you!"

"Go on," said the Secretary of Public Health, sulkily.

Lurcock produced a map of Texas and stuck a thick thumb into one corner of it. "Know that section?"

"Yes. Foothills of the Iron Mountains."

"What about it for a hospital site?"

Gandy studied the other's face to see if he were joshing; decided that he wasn't. He grunted. Did he

know that country! He knew every painful mile of it, having traveled it on mule-back in his prospecting and gambling days, and now bitterly remembered it as the most hopelessly bleak, arid, remote, waterless, sterile, God-forsaken, and intolerably hot expanse of desert ever cursed by sandstorm, alkali, and the immitigable rancor of the sun. A worse spot in which to immure tuberculosis cases could hardly have been imagined. But the keen apprehension of Dr. Gandy, ever on the watch for opportunities hidden from a less penetrant vision, bored, as it were, beneath the surface and struck——

"Oil," murmured his surmising lips.

"Just that," confirmed Lurcock.

"Who owns the land?"

"The Clairborne Oil Company has the title."

"Operating?"

"Not Clairborne. Another company is in possession."

"How's that?"

"Something phony about the deed. The other people have fenced the land and Clairborne hasn't been able to get 'em out."

"How do we figure in that?"

Lurcock took a drink, bit the end off a corpulent cigar and chewed on it for a time before discharging it, together with the reflection: "Jim Clairborne has been getting all the best of it from this administration."

"About a hundred million to date," reckoned Gandy. He did not mention, because it was superfluous between those two, that it was the Clairborne delegates and the Clairborne money that had "put over" Willis Markham in the convention. "And what have they ever done for us?"

"You don't think for a minute that the Hon. Secretary Guy is losing any money through them?"

"That's inside stuff for the Interior Department. Guy was their man from the start. They put him in and they understand each other."

"Well, this is something else again. The Interior Department isn't in on it. Clairborne is ready to deal direct with you."

"For what?"

"The Sundered Hill tract, where the Iliad Oil people are boring."

Secretary Gandy evinced a tendency to wriggle. He preferred playing his own cards. "I hardly know Mr. Clairborne." Having been well brought up, he naturally gave the honorific "Mister" to any man worth more than a million. Clairborne was worth fifty.

"You don't have to know him."

"What do I have to do?"

"Take an option on the property."

"Who from?"

Dan Lurcock supressed a snort of impatience. "From the Clairborne Oil & Refining Company, of course."

"But you said the title wasn't sound."

"It's sound enough to give an option on. And if the Department of Public Health holds the option, backed up by its power of confiscation, who's going to fight it?"

"The other people are on the ground, though."

"They won't be, very long. We'll take care of that. You send a representative down to locate fifty or sixty acres there for a hospital site. Then, later, you find that the locality isn't altogether suitable——"

"That'll be the easiest part."

"—but meantime you've got possession of the useless land and it's up to you to do the best you can for the government by selling it."

"To Clairborne? Pretty soft for him, but——"

"Now *wait!* Clairborne carries on the boring and if he strikes oil—and it's ten to one he will—he keeps mum about it and trades it in for that Hartley property that the President and his niece own. Of course it's got to be handled carefully. We'll send Charley Madrigal down there to work it through a dummy."

"Why Madrigal?"

"Because he's next to the Old Man, and nexter by several necks to Fat Burrl," chuckled the schemer. "And we've got to work through her to keep the Old Man from smelling a rat. All he has to know is that oil has been struck on some of the Hartley property, see?"

"I see everything except—where do we get off?"

"Christ! Do you have to sweat *every* dollar you handle, Gandy? This is for the good of the Party. Get that, and get it right."

Anderson Gandy, ex-bad man, terror, and carrier of a notched gun as he was won't to remind the awe-stricken bystanders when stimulated to a certain point, wasn't afraid—by his own account—of any goddamn man that ever trod shoe-leather. Nevertheless, when he saw a certain blackish gleam in the Lurcock eye and discerned a certain calcifying of the Lurcock voice, he invariably felt it prudent, in the interests of peace and trade, to accede to the Lurcock view.

"All right," he said sulkily, "I'll get in touch with Mr. Clairborne."

"Guy has seen him already. You'll find him all set."

Mr. James Clairborne had at first rebelled. Being,

as an over-confident competitor had once observed, so hard boiled that the fossil eggs of the dinosaurus were fresh-laid in comparison, he told the Secretary of the Interior that he had paid his money before the show and didn't see why he should be held up afterward.

"I expect to deal with you, Guy," he said. "But if I've got to fork out on demand to every lousy grafter that rams a gun into my guts——"

"It's all right, old man," the Secretary of the Interior soothed him, "this is a special deal. I don't know the whole of it, but Mr. Lurcock——"

"Oh, if Dan's in on it I expect it's all right. He plays a straight game."

"It looks very much to me as though you were handing over a losing proposition to the government for them to win."

"Maybe you're right. I'll take it on."

Five weeks later Mr. Charles Madrigal, dismounting very stiff, sore and sandy from a lumpy-gaited horse, beheld, in the middle of a barbed-wire-fenced rectangle of desert, operations of a lively and penetrative nature, on the precise spot designated upon his map. The company, it appeared, was obligingly doing their boring for them.

"Are you Clairborne's people?" he asked a leather-tanned young foreman on the other side of the barrier.

"Clairborne's?" The man stared, laughed. "No, are you?"

"Well, no. That is, in a way——"

"Than get the hell out of here."

"But look here, brother, I——"

"Beat it." A forty-five, uncompromisingly directed at the swelling Madrigal mid-section, gave force to the order.

Plaintively sighing, the unwelcome visitor remounted. As he turned his horse he called back goodhumoredly.

"Where's the nearest drink, you rough-neck?"

The foreman grinned. "Wait a minute." He pulled a switch which, Madrigal correctly guessed, shut off an electric current from the wires, and crawled through, proffering a flask. "Take a good one. You look like you needed it."

"You're a regular feller, whoever you are."

"Me? I'm the Iliad Oil Company, their representative on the ground, if you want to know. We own this location, and any Clairborne man that says not can say so to the judge, for it ain't safe to say it here. Savvy, hombre?"

"I guess I'm in the wrong pew," said Mr. Charles M. Madrigal resignedly. "Thanks for the drink. I'll do as much for you some day." And off he rode.

After making some pertinent inquiries at the county seat Mr. Madrigal who was, like a few hundred other friends of the administration, a deputy officer of the U. S. Secret Service, and possessed of its code, sent a long telegram beginning:

"Cupola witchfire previously exploration aftermath gaboon," and ending "gneiss hairnet percolator" which caused great disgust to Daniel Lurcock to whom it was addressed under his name in the floral cypher, which chanced to be Rosebud.

"Wants court action, does he!" growled the irate Daniel. "Wants a fried codfish ball. I'll show those guys something better than law."

Borrowing the car and chauffeur of the Honorable Morse Hambidge, Attorney-General of the U. S., without the formality of asking for it, he hurried to the

Navy Department. The Secretary saw him at once.

"Mr. Secretary, can you let me have a detachment of marines!"

"Certainly, Mr. Lurcock. How many?"

"I'll leave that to you."

"What's wanted of them?"

"To go down to Texas and clean out some squatters on government property. Secretary Gandy will give you details."

Buzzers buzzed, uniforms appeared and vanished, telephones jangled, maps were brought out, time-tables consulted, telegrams dictated.

"We'll have twelve men under a reliable officer report to your representative by Friday noon." Secretary Loomis was a most obliging official. Officials usually were obliging to Mr. Daniel Lurcock who often, in unobtrusive but valuable ways, obliged them in return.

Said Mr. Charles M. Madrigal to the wisp of a red-haired, hazel-eyed girl who had, as his confidential clerk, assuaged the rigors of his long journey to Texas: "Keep under cover, sweetie. The devil dogs are coming and you don't want to be seen."

"Don't you go out and get shot, old dear," returned Miss Zoa Farley.

"I'll direct the expedition from here—like the General Staff," said he. To the commanding officer of the expedition, a blithe spirit in a beautifully fitting uniform, he gave few directions, but explicit:

"Treat 'em gently. They don't mean any harm. And be sure to give that snappy young foreman a drink. I owe it to him. Come in and have one on me when you get back."

The bloodless Battle of Section Sixty-Five was never

reported in the papers. Nor was there legal aftermath. Fighting the U. S. Government is as futile as fighting the U. S. Marines.

Everything now worked out to the perfection of schedule. The hospital site was staked out, and so remained for the contemplation of jack rabbit and cactus owl long after the plans were abandoned; the land, including the (supposedly) uncompleted oil boring, sold to a dummy, and exchanged for some Oklahoma timber holdings; and one day Mrs. Beryl Hartley held up a Cabinet meeting for two minutes by rushing over to the Executive Offices in rapturous excitment and flinging herself upon the President's shoulder.

"Uncle Willis" gasp—"do you remember"—pant, pant—"that Texas land we got"—puff, puff—"on Charley Madrigal's advice, by trading off that old Okla" —puff, pant—"homa swamp? Well, they've struck oil on it and we're going to be rich, and now"—puff, pant, puff—"will you say I'm not a mascot!"

Upon which the President smiled affectionately at his playful niece and Mr. Secretary Sheldon gazed pointedly out of the window, and Messrs. Secretaries Gandy and Guy appeared immersed in official papers, and Mr. Secretary of the Navy Loomis looked as if he were trying to remember something, and presently as if he had remembered it and wished he hadn't.

The President patted Burrl's plump shoulder and told her she could buy a horse with her share.

Later when the money flooded in, he was always intending to look into it in detail. But he somehow never did. He was always too busy and too tired.

CHAPTER XII

MEASURED WEAPONS

"All Washington is talking," said Senator Peter Thorne across M. Jarry's secret and incomparable cafe diable, served in two overgrown demi-tasses.

"I have been talked about before," stated Edith Westervelt.

"And it has never mattered to you?"

"I survived," she uttered negligently.

"Invulnerable?"

"If having nothing hurtable left in you is invulnerability, yes."

"He's a constant visitor at your house." No name had been spoken, yet Peter Thorne used the unrelated pronoun. She accepted it as sufficiently defining.

"Well, why not?"

"A President of the United States isn't in the position of an ordinary man."

"Obviously."

For some reason the agreeable acceptance appeared to sting Mrs. Westervelt's elderly admirer. "If you choose deliberately to throw yourself into association with him——"

"But it's he that deliberately chooses to throw himself into association with me."

Senator Peter Thorne was justifiably annoyed at this. "Really, Edith, it won't do. He has a wife living, you know."

She drew down the corners of her mouth at him, looking very like an accused and amused schoolgirl. "Morality? From you, Petah?"

"Expediency. It's so infernally open."

She flushed a little. "Would you have me meet him clandestinely?"

"I almost think it would be better than this—this word-of-mouth publicity."

"I've never done anything secretly in my life."

"I should think not! You're one of those women that couldn't be inconspicuous if they wanted to. People are too interested in you."

"It is not reciprocal," she returned.

"But there is a limit to the contempt that one may exhibit toward the public. Together you and the President project a glare like a—a headlight in a dark alley."

"Your simile has elements of historical appropriateness," she admitted. "But I don't know that I like it."

"You're becoming a political issue, you know."

"Now you're trying to flatter me." She looked so ridiculously prim that he shook his head in despair.

"To warn you. Not that it is of any use."

"Mr. Daniel Lurcock did that."

Senator Thorne's heavy, powerful figure jerked upright. "When? Recently?"

"A few days after the accident. Indirectly."

"You never told me."

"Very little to tell. I couldn't even prove that the threats came from him, any more than I could prove that the espionage was at his orders."

"Are you still being shadowed?"

"Oh, no! That stopped long ago."

"Lurcock called his men off?"

"I mentioned to Mr. Markham that I did not like it, and he seemed very annoyed."

"You mentioned— You appear to have been on terms of frankness, to put it mildly."

"With whom have you ever known me to associate on any other terms?"

Down the block the raucous bellow of Jeff Sims afflicted the peaceful air. "H'lo, Marty! Whaddayah know? Heard about the Trade Board fuss?"

Senator Thorne looked disgusted, then smiled. "It would be interesting to know what they think of you down there."

"I don't flatter myself that those practical gentlemen concern themselves about me."

"Don't you! Then you're wrong. I would bet that you're discussed over every meal. The dove has certainly fluttered the crows this time."

"Dove? I? Stormy petrel, by your views. Are you going to take me up to the Art Gallery?"

"Presently. It isn't late. Do you mind waiting a little?"

"For any special reason?"

"Your suspicions are justified. At any moment Mr. Daniel Lurcock ought to emerge from the house and, working diligently the post-prandial toothpick, pass within a rod of this place."

"Well?"

"I thought we might invite him in to have a little drink."

"Why?"

"Mere vulgar curiosity to see what will happen when you two come into contact. The bird-of-paradise and

the crocodile. I shall, with your permission, order liqueurs while we wait."

They sat, sipping, until the heavy shoulders of Dan Lurcock hunched through the open doorway down the street, and seemed to fill the available air-space above the sidewalk as he approached. Thorne spoke to him as, with compressed face and unseeing eyes, he came opposite.

"Come in and have a drink."

"No thanks. . . . All right, I will." He had seen Edith Westervelt.

"You know Mrs. Westervelt, I think."

Edith bowed silently. Daniel Lurcock admitted that he knew of Mrs. Westervelt. In truth, he knew all about her that the inquiry agents of the Department of Justice had been able to turn up, which was discouragingly scant, from his point of view. Nor, now that he saw her face to face, was his lack of basis on which to deal supplied by her atmosphere of still, careless and ineradicable self-possession. It was not what he had a right to expect in a woman who was playing around with a married man, and that man the President of the United States. He was like a naturalist who should encounter a two-headed butterfly; no previous data to go on. Edith on her part saw a heavy, gross man with exaggerated hands and feet, and an asymmetrical face, one eye being set higher than its congener, which should have given him a sly and knavish look. Instead it created an impression of jovial obscenity. He seemed just on the verge of winking lusciously over some private and incommunicable joke.

"Mrs. Westervelt is beginning to find our politics interesting," remarked Senator Thorne.

Lurcock grunted doubtfully.

"As an old friend, a family friend," pursued the other with a slight but clear emphasis, "I am giving her the dubious benefit of my experience. She sometimes repays me in kind. Mrs. Westervelt has the gift of acquiring information without seeking it. It comes to her out of the air." He laughed. "Politically she is what the psychologists call 'a sensitive.' "

Not knowing precisely what this meant—or, indeed, what Thorne's procedure was leading to—but perceiving that it was his turn to say something, Dan Lurcock asked:

"You're with us, I presume? With the Party, I mean."

"No. An onlooker," she answered indifferently.

To this he gave approval. "That's the right attitude for a lady. And," he added, "the safe one."

"Do you know," said she, with an almost confidential candor, "to me the implication of danger always has the effect of a threat."

"Not't-tall, not't-tall," he protested.

"Oh, I'm not offended. Not even *very* much alarmed."

Senator Thorne laughed. Lurcock somehow felt that it was at him, though he didn't see where it came in. Maybe this skirt was trying to make a monkey of him; well, that had been tried before, but they didn't put it over on Old Dan much. Not man *or* woman. How far had she put it over on Bill Markham, he wondered. He wished that he could have two minutes' talk with her alone. As if responsive to that wish (but actually obedient to a signal from Edith which Lurcock had not observed) Peter Thorne excused himself to telephone. Well, here was his chance.

At bottom, he believed all women were alike. Go at 'em hard and they'd show the yellow streak. He put his fist on the table and leaned forward over it.

"Well, what's your game?" he demanded.

Tranquilly she returned: "You'll have to be more explicit, I'm afraid."

"I want to know what you're after with a certain party."

"The subtle implications of diplomacy," she commented derisively.

"Talk English and talk it quick. You know the party I mean."

"If I don't choose to discuss it with you?"

"You better," he threatened.

She ignored this, though her eyes grew a shade brighter. "Was that the information you were trying to obtain the day you came to my house and I declined the honor of seeing you?"

"You gave me the air, didn't you!" The memory of his wrongs at the hands of this wisp of a woman gave a rasp to his voice. But it was policy as well as anger—for ferocity often serves with women, startling them out of that assumption of privilege which is the refuge of their sex—that dictated his snarling: "I oughta 'a walked in there and taken you by the neck and shaken it out of you."

"You think so?" she asked, with a deadly quiet which abashed him as much as the way she looked at him. ("like I was something slimy in a mud-hole," reflected Mr. Lurcock. Evidently the terrorization method was not going to be so successful!)

What was it made her so cocky? Did she have something on him? What did Thorne say just now: that she had a way of picking information out of the

air? How much did she know? What cases? Not Mazie Winston; couldn't be. The Rafferty "burglary?" That had been kept out of the papers, but there had been talk. The Gosset woman? That Vetchling flat row? . . . What the hell did it matter!

"You'd talk, I guess, if the Department of Justice got after you."

"I am not aware of any activities on my part that would come within the authority of the Department of Justice."

He waggled his gross head. "Don't you be too sure."

To Thorne, returning, Edith drawled: "Petah, Mr. Lurcock considers that he made a mistake in not forcing his way into my house, and I believe the phrase was, taking me by the neck——"

"Why, damn you, Lurcock!" Senator Thorne's weary eyes had become as vivid as an enraged animal's—"if ever you or your dirty dogs——"

"Pee-*tah!* I'm shocked at your violence." She smiled at him and he sat down. "And I'm quite capable of taking care of myself," she added.

Dan Lurcock was reluctantly convinced of this, not by the words so much as by the manner; no, not by the manner so much, either. It was more a matter of atmosphere—of impregnability. It exasperated at the same time that it impressed him. So he blustered:

"Just the same, young lady——"

"Don't call me 'young lady.' You're not at a White House reception, you know."

"Huh?", Lurcock jerked out, startled and wholly failing to interpret this.

"I may as well tell you," she continued with quiet

severity, "that you permit yourself a manner toward me which I find offensive."

With unexpected good humor he replied, "I apologize. Is that fair?"

"Yes."

Thorne, who had also recovered his equanimity, said, "I'll give you a pointer about Mrs. Westervelt, Lurcock. It is quite impossible to frighten or bluff her, and I may even say that any obstacle placed in the way of her course of action simply increases the zest with which she pursues it."

"I get you. The stiffer the fence, the higher they jump."

"Precisely."

Lurcock said shrewdly, "There's no fence around Willis Markham." Thorne looked faintly pained.

"An impenetrable one, I should think," said Edith. "The divinity that doth hedge a President. Though he's quite touchingly human: almost humbly so, at times."

"I wish you'd tell me—" Much of the self-confidence had ebbed from Lurcock's manner, to be supplanted by appeal. He did not even finish the sentence. Thorne strolled over to consult with M. Jarry about a projected dinner-party.

"What?"

"What are you doing this for?"

She had one of her bewidering reversions to frankness. "Life is a thrilless thing. But there's a kind of thrill to this."

"To Old Bill? But you're so young!"

"Not that kind."

"I get you. It's his position—his power. I don't blame you."

"No, it's his pathos, I think. He's so muddled and hustled about. He's so tired. I'm sorry for him."

Lurcock was dumb. He wanted to say to the returning Thorne, "What do you know about that! Here's a girl—she's hardly more than a kid—pretending she's sorry for Willis Markham." But he suspected that the Senator would only laugh. Mrs. Westervelt, drawing on her gloves with long, suave, caressing movements, said casually:

"You are a friend of Secretary Gandy's, aren't you?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Is there anything in the investigation of his Department that is likely to involve the President? He trusts Dr. Gandy."

Lurcock laughed shortly. "The investigation stuff is off. Nothin' to it," he added with more emphasis than ingenuousness, for it had been Jeff Sims' positive though indefinite report of trouble in that quarter that had set the folds in his brow as he walked up the street. Jeff's "inside info" was usually about five per cent fact. Lurcock took his leave.

Edith Westervelt, strolling along beside Peter Thorne, mused interestedly. "I wonder what that man really thinks of me."

"What does a rhinoceros think of a humming bird?"

"Last time I was a bird-of-paradise and he a crocodile. And you look about as communicative as an owl. What *does* he think about me?"

"He's bewildered. He never saw anything like you before."

"About me and Willis Markham?" she persisted.

"Why expect me to read that muddy mind?"

"He obviously thinks I'm pursuing him because he's

President, I suppose. He believes I'm Willis Markham's mistress, doesn't he?"

"Possibly."

"It's an idea. I never happened to think of it. Or have I? Deep down I suppose I must have. . . . Don't look shocked, Peter. . . . After all, being President of the United States doesn't quite make a man a gentleman, does it, Peter? And yet——"

"I shall never understand you, Edith," he said despairingly.

Her low laughter sprang and fluttered like a butterfly in the warm air. "Neither do I," said she.

All the way back to the Department of Justice, Daniel Lurcock, with brow deeper furrowed than before, mused upon the mystery and danger of Edith Westervelt. However much she might be bluffing about other things, she'd got Old Bill. He wasn't in any doubt about that. And Lurcock did not know how to meet that problem. It was new. . . . Women! God, if Bill wanted women, he only had to lift a finger. . . . The pick of 'em all. And he'd fallen for this lah-de-dah fake countess. No, she wasn't a fake. She was a swell, all right. And a good looker in her way: but no zip: no pep. Bill must have been mushy in the bean to let her put it over him. A queer one, for sure. What was it she had said? That she was sorry for him. *Sorry!* For Bill Markham! Exacerbated bewilderment summoned an echo to Dan Lurcock's lips:

"Jesus Christ! He's President of the United States, ain't he!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE KING WAITS

No other woman of his acquaintance would have dreamed of keeping the President of the United States waiting. But Edith Westervelt's standard of values was not that of Washington's political atmosphere. She had overstayed her time in the Senate gallery through interest in Senator Welling's preliminary speech, which struck her as vague. How much did he really know, she wondered. Was he in possession of the knowledge which had recently come to her concerning Secretary Gandy's activities? If so, was he holding it in reserve for later use when he should come to put his motion for an investigation? Here she had looked at the clock and hastily left.

Traffic was kind to her progress. It opened up as if her car possessed some silent password. She had noticed for some weeks that streak of luck in the matter of signals. They all turned her way, but things did turn her way in life; it was part of the fortunate scheme of creation. Now, with her mind upon the man who was expecting her, she perceived the reason for her progress made easy. The officers knew her car. The ægis of presidential favor was over it. Discreet though her behavior had been by ordinary social standards, she had become a figure marked for over-officious privilege. It thrilled her in a way and startled and annoyed her. There was something left-

handed about such a distinction. It implied too much. What could be done about it, though? She could not well ask the President to order the District of Columbia traffic police to forget her.

Two unobtrusive gentlemen absorbed in studying the local flora of Marquette Circle apprised her by their presence that her caller had come. She went direct to the small library where she knew that she would find him.

Willis Markham, propped and pillowed in a corner of the large divan, had fallen asleep, sitting up. Her entrance did not waken him. She stood silent, pondering him, wondering about him. The boyish sweetness of the mouth, the splendor of the broad brow, the still untainted vigor and power of the frame. When the eyes should open, weariness would look out from that face. Weariness and what else? A hunger, a wanting. She had surprised it once before.

She had an impulse to take off her gloves, to go to him and press two cool, assuaging hands upon his forehead. Foolish and impossible. To do so would be an avowal and there was nothing to avow; nothing within her but liking and sympathy and a pricking sense of adventure. She seated herself, took up a book. It was an old copy of Osler's "Science and Immortality." The limpid beauty of the style poured into her mind a cool, bright stream. What would the man before her think if she read him a page at random? The incongruity roused a faintly bitter amusement. He would not understand. The beauty of it would pass over him, unseen as a bird above a blind man; the lucid philosophy would awaken his suspicion of all that was "highbrow." He would marvel uncomfortably that anybody could see anything in that kind

of stuff. . . . And he was President of the United States!

He stirred, fingered his temples, opened his eyes upon her still smile.

"I'm sorry," he said, jumping to his feet.

She shook her head. "Don't be. I like it."

"My making a sleeping room of your library?"

"Your feeling that you can come here and rest."

"It's a restful place. Just being in a place that you have been in rests me. But I hate to waste the little time that I can get with you. How long have you been here?"

"Five minutes. Less."

"That isn't so bad. I've got half an hour. Only three important appointments waiting for me. Let 'em wait. I want to talk to you about Burrl."

"Mrs. Hartley?"

"Yes. You haven't been to see her yet."

"I'm such a dismal failure in social matters," she evaded.

"Yes, you are!" he jeered jovially. "The British Ambassador says you're the most sought-after woman in Washington."

"Oh, old Stickles! Stickles is a darling. We're old chums, so he is prejudiced in my favor."

"I do want you to know Burrl. You'd like her."

"I'm sure I should," she agreed with polite mendacity. "But official functions dismay me."

"Yes, they do!" he retorted fondly and derisively. "Nothing scares you, I'll bet. This isn't official, anyway. It's personal. I want your advice."

"Advice? About Mrs. Hartley. Surely——"

"I think it's going to be a go between her and Charley Madrigal."

"I recall your telling me about him."

"Yes. He's a prince. One of the best. He's Dr. Gandy's right-hand man in the Department of Public Health. Great work they're doing there."

"Oh! Isn't that likely to be troublesome later?"

"How, troublesome?" he asked, surprised.

"If this investigation goes through."

"It won't go through."

"I was in the Senate gallery this afternoon and heard Senator Welling's speech."

"That dirty crook! We've got his number."

"He didn't look like a crook," she reflected.

"He'll be indicted next week."

"For what?"

"Grafting on government concessions. Atlanta will be his finish."

"But that won't stop the investigation of Secretary Gandy's department will it?"

"You don't know much about politics, and that's a fact," he said genially. "Do you think that the Senate will pass a measure fathered by an exposed grafter? Not on your life."

"But an indictment isn't a conviction."

"It will be a complete show-up in this case. Dan Lurcock tells me it's a dead open-and-shut case."

"You trust Mr. Lurcock?"

"I should say so. He's the oldest and best friend I've got."

"And Doctor Gandy?"

"Gandy's all right. He's a hundred percenter when it comes to standing by his friends. And *smart!* They won't get anything on him."

"As honest as he is smart?" she persisted.

"Now look here, Edith—Mrs. Westervelt." His

break had been semi-intentional. He glanced at her to see how she had taken it but learned nothing from the composed loveliness of her face. "You don't want to believe all the poll-parroting that you hear around Washington. Why, everybody knows Andy Gandy. He was one of the most popular men in the Senate." He advanced this as a conclusive argument.

"Mr. President, will you do something if I ask you?"

"I'll do anything in the world for you. But I wish you wouldn't call me Mr. President," he added hopefully.

"This isn't for me, exactly. It may be for your own protection. I want you to ask Dr. Gandy whether it is true that he has bought La Favorita."

"Sounds like a cigar," he chuckled.

She repressed a movement of impatience. "It is a ranch, adjoining the property of some friends of mine in California."

"Well, why shouldn't he have bought it?"

"The price was two hundred and thirty thousand dollars. Dr. Gandy is said to have been so straightend for money until recently that he could not pay his back taxes."

"That's no crime. But if the ranch cost anything like that, he didn't buy it."

"Will you ask him?"

"Certainly. And he will tell me there's nothing in it."

"And you'll believe him?"

Willis Markham laughed indulgently. "My friends don't lie to me and they don't let me down. You ladies can never understand that real he-men are a hundred per cent square with each other."

She said: "I like that in you, that stanchness to your friends. *If* they're your friends. I hope they are. I hope you're right and I'm wrong. But I'm worried."

"Bless you for that! I didn't realize you took so much interest."

"In your administration? But I do."

"I'd rather it was in me."

"Perhaps the two aren't quite divisible. As a matter of politics——"

"That's it; politics! "he exclaimed petulantly, as a clock struck. "My time is up and we've had nothing but politics, politics, politics."

"Isn't it the chief end of man?" she smiled.

"But I don't come to you to talk politics. Don't you realize that?"

She made no answer. She had risen and gone with him into the hallway. The first time.

"Do you want me to tell you why I came?"

"No."

"You know already."

"Yes."

"And you—you're not going to stop my coming?"

She said clearly: "No. I'm not going to stop you, if you want to come."

He bent and kissed her on the lips. She made no movement to evade or check him. She stood quite motionless, quite inert, so passive and inscrutable that he said with unwonted timidity: "I oughtn't to have done that."

"That is for you to say," was the quiet reply.

"Then I'll say it. You know I love you, Edith."

She seemed to consider this, then nodded slowly as

if she had reached a decision and approved it in herself.

"I think you had better come back. For just five minutes. . . . No! don't touch me, please."

He followed her into the room. The door closed behind them. She stood facing him, with a look in her eyes which he had not seen before.

"I think we have to understand each other, you and I, Willis Markham. What kind of a woman do you think I am?"

"A wonder! The most wonderful woman in——"

"Yes: but—I suppose you think of women as being either good women or bad ones."

"Everybody does," he replied in naïve good faith.

"Which am I?"

"I've never even thought of it," he protested.

"Is that quite true?"

Confused by the gravity of her bearing, he said: "I've heard things. I never paid any attention to 'em. Everybody gets talked about, here. I don't take any stock in that stuff. All jealousy and back-biting."

"But I'm afraid you must, in this case. You see, by your ready-made standards, I am what you call a bad woman."

"I don't believe it. I won't believe it." He was vehement. "I don't believe you've ever done anything to be ashamed of in your life."

A sudden, profound fire glowed within her eyes. "I'm not ashamed of what I've done. But you might consider me shameless for not being ashamed."

He made a movement of protest. She said abruptly: "Two men have been important in my life. I gave my husband all I could of myself, out of admiration

and affection and respect. I gave the other man all that I was and am and ever can be."

"You mean you were—he was——"

"My lover."

The tremor and passion of her voice pierced him. He wanted to know more, and he could not endure to know more. But one thing he had to know. His lips felt thick and muffled as he put his query, "Did he ditch you?"

The crassness of the words passed over her. "He is dead."

"Ah!"

"He was a scientist, an experimenter, a pioneer in dangerous fields, and he went on when he knew that it was almost certain death. For four years I lived between heaven and hell. Now the world seems at times too dull to continue living in."

He whispered: "That is why—the poison—the bottle I took away from you."

"Yes."

With swift inspiration he challenged her. "What would he have thought of that?"

"That's what I don't know," she cried sharply. "If I knew——"

"He wouldn't have stood for it," asserted Willis Markham. "Not if he was the kind of man you take him for."

"How can I know? How can anyone know?"

His mind reverted to himself, to his own part and portion in this complication of life. "You've told me this because you know I'm in love with you."

"With the shell of me. You've seen the empty locust shells on tree-trunks. There is no more to me than that. I've nothing left to give."

"Look how young you are," he pleaded. "Why, you're like a young girl."

"I'm thirty-two. I've lived since I was sixteen and died when I was thirty."

"You'll come alive again," he argued with desperate hopefulness. "You'll come to some day and find you're a woman and not an empty shell. You're too——"

"There are times," she broke in with a subdued violence, "when I do remember that I'm a woman. Then I hate myself."

He muttered, "I'm a fool if I ever see you again."

"That is the wisest thing that has been said between us to-day."

His optimistic smile broke through the gloom. "No: it isn't. It's the dumbest. The past is past. It can't stick to you forever. I play the Markham luck. It's brought me everything I've gone after, so far."

A mirror to his recovered gayety, she said. "Well, nothing is impossible in this life."

When he kissed her again, she was neither repelled nor stirred, neither regretful nor elate. More than anything else she was curious. About herself. About him. About this power to influence, perhaps guide, perhaps save a man in his unique position.

CHAPTER XIV

BETWEEN FRIENDS

Dan Lurcock was a fighter. He believed in hitting hard and hitting first. Senator Welling he regarded as an enemy within the party. A rat. Nothing was too bad for such a traitor. He had sent out a corps of operatives from the secret service whose instructions were to go over the records and "get" Welling. Witnesses were persuaded, intimidated, or bribed, a case was made out, flimsy, baseless in fact and law, but plausible enough, and the trap was sprung. Headlines all over the country announced that Senator Welling had been indicted for graft. It had been the intention to make the charge more intimately and personally scandalous, but this hopeful design had fallen through.

Upon hearing the glad news of the indictment Dr. Anderson Gandy repaired to the Crow's Nest, where he found the proprietor sitting complacently next to a Scotch highball, his regulation preface to a mighty luncheon. Lurcock opened with the usual invitation, which the Secretary declined.

"What's on your nerves, Andy?"

"This Senate business."

"Hell! Forget it. We're sitting pretty, aren't we? Right on Welling's neck."

"Can you convict? Hambidge thinks not."

"Between you and I, Andy, I haven't figured so

much on convicting, as on stirring up a stink. Of course, if we could get the right kind of judge, and a hand-picked jury——"

"You told the President you could convict."

"Just to keep his mind easy."

"Dan, we've got to head off this investigation."

"That's what we're trying to do, ain't it!" returned Lurcock impatiently: "Even if we don't, it'll be a fizzle. It's all set. Suppose Welling gets the motion for an investigation referred to the Public Lands Committee where the lousy insurgents will vote against us, and they report it out. Well, we've got our chance to kill it in the Senate. You've got plenty of good friends there. Say we fall down there, though. Then we play for delay. The Old Man will step in and announce that no member of his Cabinet can rest a day under the cloud of uninvestigated charges, and that the properly constituted government agency will protect the public interest by probing all the facts at once; that he has the highest confidence in Secretary Gandy's integrity and faithfulness, and it is by your own wish that this is to be done. Well, who makes the investigation? The Department of Justice, don't it? What more do you want? Before Welling's committee can get into action, you'll have a clean bill of health from us, and Welling will be all tarred up and waiting for the feathers. Let 'em go ahead with their committee then. Who cares? It'll be all cold."

Secretary Gandy's narrow, sallow countenance pursed and shriveled. "I care. Dan, it's got to be choked off. These goddam drag-net committees, when they get digging, you can't tell what they might not turn up."

Lurcock's massive face detached itself from the tall

glass, darkening. "You've covered your tracks, haven't you?"

"Sure, I have. In the Department."

"Then what's crabbing you?"

"There was an outside deal, a private deal of my own. Somebody's spilled it to the President."

"The hell they have! Who?"

"I wish I knew. He asked me about it, but he wouldn't tell me where he got his stuff."

"What was the deal?"

"A ranch in California. I bought it. Through a dummy."

"Ye-ah, I heard something about that. Who's the dummy?"

"A cousin of mine. He's all right."

Lurcock swore. "How much?"

"Two hundred and thirty thousand dollars."

"Cash?"

"Ninety thousand down."

"Where did you get it?"

"That's my business," returned the other sullenly.

"Maybe it'll be Willing's business."

"How's he going to find out?"

"What's going to prevent the same fellow that told Bill from telling him?"

"They can't pin anything on me," said Gandy weakly. "It isn't in my name."

"What did you tell Bill?"

"I stalled."

"Sure, you stalled," Lurcock was at no pains to conceal his contempt. "What bluff did you put up?"

"I told him I borrowed the cash from a personal friend who was in on the buy but wanted his name kept out of it, and that I'd give him the name as soon as I

could see my friend and get released from my promise of secrecy."

"We-ell, *did* you borrow it?"

"Yes, I did," retorted the other defiantly.

"Who of?"

"A good friend of mine."

"In the oil business, maybe."

The Secretary of Public Health made no reply.

"Couldn't keep your snoot out of the trough, could you?" pursued the other reflectively. "Saw how easy the trick was turned in our Texas deal for Old Bill, so you're been scheming out the same game with the oil folks and collecting the graft in advance. You needn't take the trouble to deny it. I'm onto you, Andy Gandy."

"You're a hell of a one to talk about graft! I guess we're all in the same boat."

Gandy's restless eyes had taken in a packet on the desk neatly sealed for registered express and addressed to a bank in a small Michigan town which was subsequently to lose most of its books by an unexplained fire. Fifteen bills of the denomination of $1,000 made up the packet. One of the minor commercial alcohol rings had "come through" that morning. The Secretary of Public Health edged over to get a better view of it.

"Keep your hands off!" snapped Lurcock.

"I wasn't going to touch it," quavered the other. He gathered bravado enough to add, "*I* haven't got a private bank in the family to send my stuff to."

"Jeff!" roared the big man.

Jefferson Sims entered with his unfailing grin.

"Hello, Andy. Another highball, Dan?"

"Yes. And take that damn jewelry of your girl's out of here."

The complete companion removed the packet.

"Well, Andy," said Lurcock, modifying his voice to a quiet hardness. "You and me won't get anywhere by scrapping. We've got to think of the Old Man now. If there's a big stink in your Department and they pin anything on you, it might ditch his chance for a second term. He's got to repeat. It'd break his heart not to. So we've got to get you whitewashed up. Where's Welling going to make his attack?"

"On the transfers of hospital property and equipment. That's all he's got."

"Suppose I get the Old Man to O. K. those and say they were all made with his knowledge and approval."

Gandy's pale eyes lighted. "Do you think you could do that, Dan?"

"I might. It'd crab Welling's game, wouldn't it?"

"Absolutely. The Senate would follow the President. But how are you going to fix it with him?"

"I'll tell him the Department has made its own investigation, and everything is all right; absolutely on the level. He'll take it from me. But it's up to you to make good with him on your fairy-tale about the money for the ranch."

Gandy dropped all pretence. "Then I've got to borrow ninety thousand somewhere and borrow it quick."

"I see. Date the note back and have something to show Bill, eh?"

"That's the idea. Where can I get the ninety grand?"

"I think I can maybe get it."

"Dan, if you'll do that for me——"

"For you, you blazin' fool! I'd see you in hell be-

fore I'd lift a finger for you. It's Bill I'm thinking of."

"Now, Dan," protested the Secretary of Public Health. "There's no occasion for your getting sore about it. I'll admit I overplayed my hand a little, but how could I tell the thing would leak? I'll be damned if I see now how——"

Lurcock kicked the door open and bellowed: "Jeff! See if you can get Sig McBride down here. Right away." To his visitor he said: "Clairborne gave you the money, didn't he?"

Gandy gulped.

"How? Not by check?"

"Liberty bonds. It was only a loan, Dan."

"Yay-ah! Sure! I know those kinda loans. They look awful pretty and convincing, I guess, when they're tied up with the sale to the Clairborne Oil and Refining Company of government confiscated land that happens to have oil on it! . . . Let me do the talking when Sig comes."

Mr. Sigmund McBride, serene, dapper, small and neat and quick like a cricket, entered with that air of being comfortably conscious of the subservience of a world wherein he moved gloriously, thanks to his millions. He cheerfully acceded to the offer of a drink.

"What's on, boys? Another consignment of prewar for my expert judgment?"

"No. This is business," replied Lurcock.

"Spill it in my ear," invited the genial Mr. McBride.

"Andy has to have ninety grand. He wants you to lend it to him."

"Like hell!" said Mr. McBride, losing no iota of his geniality.

"No. I mean it."

"Mean as far as you like."

"He's got an important deal on."

"So's ninety thou' important. To me, anyway."

"Listen, Sig." Lurcock's voice sank. "This is a chance to do something for the Old Man."

"Why don't you say so? If Old Bill wants half a million he can get it on a whisper. That's how much I think of him. When'll I see him?"

"I don't know as you'll see him on this. He doesn't know about it."

"Nothing doing in the dark—said Wise Winnie the Wide-awake Widow."

"Better tell him, Dan," put in Gandy.

"If you say so. It's your funeral." At which the Secretary of Public Health shuddered lightly as a man does when a goose walks over the grave of his reputation. Lurcock explained the dilemma.

"Hell! You don't want ninety thou'," said the millionaire, reasonably. "All you want is for me to go to the front and tell Old Bill that I loaned you the money. Make out the note any date that fits and give it to me."

"There's some talk of an investigation on the Hill. So, just to be safe, you'd better give me the check, dated back three months, so we could both swear to the loan. I'll never cash it."

Mr. McBride thought it over and his thoughts were private and crafty. "Anything to oblige a friend—so long as it costs nothing," he cackled, and a great breath of relief burst from the oppressed bosom of Dr. Gandy.

Antedated checks on two banks were duly made out and turned over. A drink followed and the trio

separated, one in the high spirits of release from dread, the second glum with foreboding (for Dan Lurcock feared a fool above all dangers) the third, as always, at peace with himself and the purchasable world.

He drove at once to his two banks, drew out all but a small balance from each and notified them not to honor an overdraft. Doubtless Andrew Gandy would keep his word to a friend and benefactor. Still, it did no harm to protect oneself.

Mr. McBride was as cautious as he was rich.

CHAPTER XV

WONDER WHAT A PRESIDENT THINKS ABOUT

Cabinet meetings bored President Willis Markham. Humanly run they might not be so bad, but as conducted with his present staff they were far from his notion of the way to transact business pleasantly. They were stiff, formal. Nothing chummy about them. No get-together spirit. He had supposed in advance that they would be cheerful and enlivening like directors' meetings, a pleasant break in official routine. Forevisioning them in the happy days between election and inauguration, he had seen himself starting things at the meeting by handing around the cigars—drinks, he supposed, would be out of place—and making a little offhand speech; perhaps telling them the latest good one that he had picked up; nothing rough, of course, but one with a little kick in it. His first and last essay in that direction was a distressful memory; Susie Sheldon's sour pretense that he hadn't got the point; Covert's abstracted and slightly impatient smile—Covert was always in a sweat to get through and get back to work, a close-mouthed, unsociable beggar, though he did play good poker and was a tricky, dangerous, brilliant bettor; Maxson's politely inquiring expression—too damn rich to be human, Maxson was; Hambidge's dutiful cackle, and Loomis's mechanical boom. Gandy, it is true, had bellowed his appreciation. Handy old Andy! He knew a good one

when he heard it. They couldn't tell Bill Markham that there was anything wrong with Andy. Guy had liked it, too. But the others! Frozen faces. Why did a nation have to do business through a bunch of sourballs like that?

What a Cabinet he could have picked for himself if they had let him alone. Good fellows, with broad-gauge minds. Gandy and Guy would have been there, of course; they were old Senate pals. For the rest, he need hardly have gone outside of the whist parties at the Crow's Nest. Men that could play poker like those fellows had *brains*. Nobody could tell him different. Being head of such a Cabinet would be something like!

He pictured the ideal community of spirit, the friendly faces, the easy attitudes, the smoke-rings peacefully rising into the air (no damned windows open to blow a draft down your neck), the inspiriting clink of ice in the glasses for nobody in that gathering would blab to the outside world, the noiselessly deft attendance of some trusted servitor like Rastus who would know what every man wanted before he asked for it; the easy, chatty talk before he should start the business of the day. "Well, boys; time to get down to brass tacks." After that the interchange of opinion, the conference on details of policy; all the guff and highbrow words cut out. Quick and sharp like bets in the pot after somebody had declared openers. "The Italian colonization? That's up to you, Dan." For in this ideal cabinet Lurcock would be Secretary of State. *There* was a man you could tie to. "Income tax percentages? Figure it out your own way, Sig. You must be good at figures or you couldn't manage your fifty millions." "Air mail appropriations? Get

together with Sig on that, Charley." "That bunch of aliens? Forget it. Let 'em in. They can't do any harm and they'll all be votes in a couple of years." "Naval adjustment with England? That's up to you and the Kink, Tim. Let George do it." Then, when the routine was disposed of they could settle down to the important matter of the Party's welfare, consult on the factional differences that were always cropping up, figure out congressional probabilities in the coming election, analyze and perfect their plans for keeping the United States under the control of the Party and therefore the richest, happiest, most contented of nations. That was real leadership and for that Willis Markham felt himself thoroughly equipped. If only he had around him a bunch with whom he could work companionably instead—

"The members of the Cabinet are all here, sir," the assistant secretary reminded him.

He got up from his chair feeling glum. He was fed up with that lot. Sheldon especially was on his nerves, with his peevish puritanism. That sanctimonious, dried up wisp of a Sunday school superintendent! Probably never took a drink in his life. His whiskers would crackle if you touched them; so dry. Speaking of drink, he wondered if he hadn't taken one too many last night. He'd have to shut down a little. He entered the long, pleasant room in which some fresh-air fiend had opened a window. At a savage glance from him a secretary closed it. The group around the table rose to its feet with a rustle.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Be seated, please," said he in his voice of instinctive geniality. Purely instinctive it was. He would have liked to bark at them;

"For crisesake siddown and get to business!"

What would they do in the face of such an opening? Sheldon would probably throw a fit and resign as soon as he came to. Good business, too. If only he could be got rid of without a protest from that wing of the Party which always wanted a psalm-singer on the place to please the Best Element. To hell with the Best Element! They mostly played golf on election day and didn't know a primary from a recount. Still, they did come through with the sinews of war when called on—if they were called urgently enough. No; he had to keep Sheldon. He took his seat and assumed his expression of thoughtful statesmanship.

But his thoughts were far from the routine which was at once set in motion with a clack of human machinery. Quietly he studied Dr. Gandy's face. It had lost its poker mask. Old Andy looked worried. A damn, dirty, stinkin' shame that a few notoriety-hunting, cheap skates could make trouble for a regular fellow like him. He'd show 'em up in the end, all right; there wasn't any doubt but what he could prove a clear record against all those charges, just like he had in the Favorita Ranch deal that Edith Westervelt had put up to him, Willis Markham, to pass on to Gandy. But had he entirely cleared that up? Anyway he had promised to and he'd make good on his promises the same as he did on his bets. Trust old Handy Andy! Edith had been listening to the poll-parrots.

The investigation gossip had centered on Gandy's management of his departmental affairs mostly, but some whispers about oil deals had percolated through that filter which dubiously protects . . President's supply of information. If they should go into that, was it possible that his own new income from oil would be

called into question? Hardly, he thought. Of course, that had nothing to do with Gandy. Still, perhaps he had better look into it a little further; ask his niece about it. Burrl was a smart woman; as smart as they made 'em. Pretty stuck on herself, too, the way she put that trade through on the old family property. He'd been meaning to go over the details with her, but he never seemed to find time. If he did see her for a few minutes before dinner, there was usually only space for a drink and a few words, and at night his wearied mind shrank from the added burden of personal inquiry.

Yes; Burrl's little deal had certainly been a life-saver for him. He was in pretty deep with Thurlow & Co., his brokers, nearly a hundred and thirty thousand. Of course they would carry him. They'd carry him for a million as long as he was President. And he meant to be President six years longer at least. What could stop him? Just the same he'd be glad to have that account cleared up. It wouldn't take so long now, with the dividends coming in stronger every month. After all, why worry? It was Burrl's responsibility, and back of her was Charley Madrigal, and Charley was too smart to put over anything that had a possible come-back to it. Wonder how things stood between those two. Wonder when Edith was going to call on her.

Edith! His mind became a soft haze, shot through with sudden flames of hot speculation. He had never known a woman of her sort before. She was the real thing, a swell in every way. Yet she was so easy to talk to. She took an interest in the kind of thing that a fellow liked to talk about; serious things, of course, politics. With a wife like her——

His thoughts checked as at a barrier. Like most men of his small-town type he was broadly charitable in his views of male morality, and just as inflexible in his standards for women. As Edith had surmised, there were only two kinds of women in his category, good women and bad women. She had challenged one of the deepest-seated prejudices (he would have called it a principle) in his nature when she had told him of having had a lover. Now the recollection returned upon him, acid and biting. Could he marry a woman who—even if——

Poor Sara Belle! She very likely wouldn't live much longer. His memory reverted to her with kindliness, but without regret except for her sufferings. She had certainly been a help, a driving, nagging force, up to a point where his achievements rose above the level of her parochial capabilities, and in the realization of this latter, she had broken. If she should die, would Edith Westervelt marry him, supposing he were willing to ignore her past? Could she be judged by ordinary, American standards? European-trained women, he knew, had different ideas on sex morality. Certainly she had told him of her liaison without shame, almost with pride. She had lived and moved in circles where a woman might be a law unto herself, where a woman like her, a goddess in the right of her beauty and splendor, was above the rules that bound, compelled, and sometimes tainted human relations. If she had risen above such considerations once, why not again? Perhaps—perhaps—*Scandal!*

The word broke in upon his meditations. Had his mind called it forth, reptilian and minatory, from some muddy depth? He roused himself to the fact that the word had been uttered, that it was still ringing in his

ears, that it had been directed to him, and that the eyes of the gathering were now upon him.

"I say, Mr. President, that we may be called upon to face the possibility of open scandal." The dry-stinging voice of Secretary Sheldon sent his vagrant thoughts scurrying into a huddle like a hawk above chickens.

Scandal? What scandal? Could that whiskered hag in pants be hinting at him and Edith Westervelt? By God, if he was——

"The question for determination," continued the speaker, "is whether we can afford to ignore a charge against the official integrity of one of our number. I am not implying any truth in the charge. I am, personally, convinced that our colleague can at the proper time satisfactorily explain and justify his every official action. But if the charge is formally presented, as I understand it will be, I think we should be in a position to affirm with knowledge our confidence in the Secretary of Public Health."

Attorney-General Hambidge fussed himself to his feet. "I may say that the Department of Justice has been conducting a secret inquiry into the matter, Mr. President, and that Mr. Lurcock assures me there is absolutely no foundation for the charges."

"Do I understand that Mr. Lurcock—Mr. Daniel Lurcock, is it not?"—queried the Secretary of State with smooth, offensive ingenuousness, "is officially representing the Department of Justice in this matter? And, if so, in what capacity?"

"Mr. Lurcock—er—er—sometimes acts in a confidential capacity for the Department."

"With my full knowledge and approval," added the President testily.

"In that event there is no more to be said." Secretary Sheldon swallowed the untasty dose with a smug face, but his cold voice twitched in his throat.

"Let us proceed with the business of the day," said Willis Markham.

At the close of the meeting Gandy remained.

"You know what that old son-of-a-bitch is after, don't you, Bill?"

"After you, I judge."

"He's too pure and pious to sit in the same room with me. He's trying to edge me out."

"Out of the cabinet? By God, you don't get out. He can get out if he don't like it."

"No. That won't do. He's your best window-dressing. If he got out he'd raise the issue of purity against you and go after the nomination, with all the holy-to-God crowd backing him."

"Well, you can't quit under fire. You're all right as far as the department business goes. You heard what Hambidge said. That'll be put up as an official report if necessary and sprung when the time comes. There's only one point that bothers me; I've got to be sure on that."

"The ranch deal?"

"That's it."

"Within three days I'll bring the man to see you that lent me the money."

"That'll be fine, Andy. Great! Before we're through we'll make those prairie-dogs sorry they ever started anything on this administration."

Left for a rare moment to himself Willis Markham yawned and stretched and purred. After all it was swell to be President.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BENEVOLENT CONSPIRATORS

THE envelope was addressed in round, firm characters, rather small. Sensitive to handwriting, Edith Westervelt judged that her unknown correspondent was a person of simplicity and directness. But he had given no name; she did not like that. Had merely said that he would wait. She cut open the envelope only to find within another and smaller one, also sealed. This contained a visting card.

The President

Across the face in Willis Markham's long scrawl were the words, "Please see bearer, W. M."

"Show him into the sun porch," she directed the maid.

As he rose upon her entry she at once recognized him as the diffident seal-like man who had come for Willis Markham after the accident. He was less perturbed now than on that adventurous night. Like his writing he was round and firm and rather small. For the rest, he was middle-aged, neutrally and neatly dressed, and wore bone-rimmed spectacles of tinted glass, giving him somehow the effect of preferring a subdued light in which his inconspicuousness would be still less noticeable.

"It's Mr. Fosgate, isn't it?" she asked pleasantly.

"Yes. Kind of you to remember me," he answered in a voice of surprising warmth.

She stifled an irrelevant inclination to ask him whether he didn't sing, and murmured: "The circumstances were such as to impress one's memory."

"I suppose you wonder why I am here."

"Mr. Markham sent you, didn't he?"

"No."

"He didn't send you to me?"

"He didn't even know that I was coming."

"Then please explain this extaordinary procedure." She held out the slip of pasteboard which promptly and as if by the motivation of occult and latent powers transferred itself from her possession to his.

"The President's card? It seemed the readiest way to get to see you."

"Indeed! Is it a forgery then?"

"Certainly not." He seemed faintly surprised. "It is a—a permanency. To be used at my discretion."

"I begin to see. It is not addressed to me, then."

"To you. To any one. To whom it may concern."

"Do many of the presidential circle possess this talisman?"

"This is the only one."

"And do you put it to frequent use?"

"Very infrequent. I'm sorry you're annoyed."

"I am not annoyed. . . . How do you know that I am annoyed? Melodrama always annoys me."

"Yes; it must have that appearance." He smiled. "If I grabbed your wrist and hissed out 'S-s-s-sh, woman! I must and will have your help!' I should be quite within my rôle."

She laughed, liking the little man better every

moment, in spite of her annoyance. "You've hardly the make-up for a villain, Mr. Fosgate."

"Nor of a conspirator?" he asked anxiously.

"Is this what is known as underground politics?" she retorted.

"That depends upon what you call politics."

"Willis Markham is politics, isn't he? He seems to have little enough chance of being anything else. A person, for example."

"Isn't he a person, to you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't mean to be impertinent. This is very difficult."

"If so, you're making the difficulty. I am not afraid of words, Mr. Fosgate. Nor of facts."

"It is kind of you to make it easy for me."

"I am not kind. But I confess that I am interested."

"I wonder how much." The murmur was hardly audible under the thick stubble of mustache.

"What?"

"Interested; yes. But in what? In Willis Markham? Or in the President of the United States?"

"I should have thought that they were one and the same."

"Interested enough to care to use your influence?" he persisted.

"You take much for granted. Why should you assume that I have any influence?"

As if she had not spoken he continued musingly: "You could do anything with him, if you cared—enough."

"Why should you assume that I care?"

"Who could help it?" he answered simply.

"*Your* feeling for him is apparent enough."

"I'd cut off my right hand"— he held it out, considering it with a speculative eye, a gesture which gave a shocking effect of physical realism to his statement— "to help him."

"Does he need help?"

"Yes. He does. His administration does."

"I thought everything was going so well."

"It has been. Too well. That's the danger."

"I'm not versed enough in politics to understand that."

"When an administration has everything its own way, there is always the temptation to take advantage of it on the part of some people."

"Who? Mr. Lurcock? Secretary Guy? Secretary Gandy?"

"I'm giving no names. But I wish the President would play in with the other crowd a little."

"Which crowd?"

"Sheldon, Maxson, Covert. The stronger men in the Cabinet."

"He doesn't like those men."

"Neither do I. But they're better for him right now than our crowd."

"Would you expect him to go back on his friends?"

Timothy Fosgate laughed. "Old Bill Markham go back on a friend! When the Washington Monument tumbles into the Potomac."

"He seems to have a loyal one in you, anyway."

"Mrs. Westervelt, I believe I'm the only one who isn't trying to use him one way or another."

"It must be a strong temptation to use the friendship and confidence of a man in his position. And I suppose one couldn't use it without abusing it."

"Would it be a temptation to you?"

"To me? I really can't see in what way I could profit by it."

"That's just the point. That is why I've come to you."

"Because you thought I might be disinterested?"

"I hoped so."

"Mr. Fosgate, I want to make a rather unusual request of you. Will you take off your glasses?"

"Certainly. No special reason for wearing them indoors." He detached them, blinked, slowly lifted his head and met, across the wicker wheel-stand that separated them, her direct, probing gaze.

The eyes gave her a shock, almost a thrill, looking in sombre beauty out of that placid and commonplace countenance; so mournful, quiet and steady were they in their depth and brilliance.

"I wanted to know whether you were—trustworthy," she stated with a little hitch, and a little laugh to steady her voice before the last word.

"I am. So far as Willis Markham is concerned."

"Yes. You are. Now I want to know what you think of me."

"In what respect?"

"As regards the President."

He raised to her again those melancholy and limpid eyes whose gaze had drooped to rest on his hands, which in turn rested on his knees and asked in the vibrant richness of his voice:

"What are you going to do with him?"

"An extraordinary question."

"Because you can do anything you like, you know, if—"

"If?" she prompted.

"If you wish."

"That isn't what you were thinking. Not all that you were thinking."

"No; it isn't."

"Go on. If what?"

"If you cared enough for him to carry through."

"In plain words you mean, if I become his mistress."

"It might be that."

"Would you be surprised to know that I haven't had the opportunity?"

"He is afraid of you. Timid as a schoolboy in love for the first time."

"A touching picture," she said lightly but not unkindly. "Suppose we put it in the form of a hypothetical question: if it came to that issue what would be your impartial advice?"

"How could it be impartial? I'm prejudiced."

"In his favor?"

"Yes."

"Therefore you would be opposed to it."

"No. I'd be for it."

"You think I would be a good and useful influence over him," she mocked, "even in that relation?"

"In any relation where you could supplant the present influences."

"Let's lay our cards on the table, Mr. Fosgate. I am not Willis Markham's mistress. I am not in love with him. He interests me more than I've been interested for many years. But that is not love, and without love—" She shook her head slowly and the sun rays wove strands in her gleamy hair. "There are times when it is a temptation to try my power. Every normal woman has a lust for power, I suppose. But the price is rather high, isn't it?" she concluded gently.

"You'll have to use your power soon if it is to do any good," he asserted unexpectedly.

"Why?"

"He's running head on into trouble."

"Tell me," she said peremptorily.

"Gandy is up to his neck in graft."

She nodded. "I know."

"Lurcock's department has whitewashed him—even Dan doesn't know how deep he is in—and between them they have about worked the President around to issuing a statement that everything in the Department of Public Health has been done with the Presidential knowledge and approval."

"What is that for?"

"To head off the investigation."

"Will it do that?"

"Three chances out of four, it will."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then Gandy will crash and the President will go down in the crash with him."

"He hasn't issued the statement yet?"

"No. But he's promised it."

"Can't he be stopped?"

"I've tried. He won't listen. You don't know Bill Markham. Loyality to his friends is a fetish with him. He'd go to the stake for it."

"If he won't listen to you, he wouldn't listen to anybody."

"Yes. He would. To you. I know Bill. He'd give his soul to the woman he loves and you're that woman."

She drew back, revolted for the moment. "You mean he would betray his friends?"

"You've got to show him that his friends have be-

trayed him. Nobody but you can do it. Will you do it?"

A slow fire had lighted in her eyes. "Let me see my way. What would happen if the President's statement is used and fails of its effect?"

"I'll outline it," he returned with sudden vigor. "Gandy will be indicted. Madrigal, too. They've been running riot. The Department of Justice will be tainted and Lurcock's relations to it may come out. That'll be a pretty story. Those men are Bill's chosen cronies; notoriously so. He'll be smirched: smirched black. I don't say he'd be impeached, though it might come to that; but all the best men in the Cabinet would quit. They're restive now, having to sit in with crooks like Gandy and Guy, and a doddering idiot like Hambidge. Out they'd get, and that would mean the strength of the party alienated from the President and his chance of a renomination gone glimmering."

There was a long silence. When finally she spoke, it was in a subdued tone. "I don't know. I can't promise anything. It's rather overwhelming. . . . He has such a child-like faith that the people are with him, and in his popularity and his deserving it. It's pretty terrible in a way."

"It would kill him," said Fosgate simply.

"Oh, no!" she returned bitterly. "People don't escape as easily as that."

He rose. "I'll be grateful to you as long as I live."

"You needn't be. Very likely I shall make a mess of it. But I'd like to save him. The first time I saw him I had the sense of something simple and appealing and futile about him. And," she smiled into his eyes, "a little I'd like to help on account of you. Because of something you didn't say."

"Most people would have considered that I said too much."

"You did not mention a certain contingency."

"You mean his wife? Poor Sara Belle! She probably hasn't a month to live."

"I hadn't any idea that it was so near," said she, startled.

"I'm afraid so."

"That makes it all the more remarkable that you did not hold out to me the lure of eventually being the President's wife. Perhaps you think he wouldn't want to commit himself that far?"

"He? He'd give up the Presidency to marry you."

"Then am I to set it down to your delicacy," she smiled, "that you did not suggest—"

"Set it down to my estimate of your character. I don't try bribery where bribery is of no use."

"I don't know that I quite understand."

"I thought you might give yourself," he said in the glamorous texture of his voice. "I never thought you might sell yourself."

She flushed. "You pay me a rare compliment."

"It is meant so."

"I accept it."

"If you would marry him when the time comes," he began with lively eagerness— "But unless he cuts loose from his playmates he won't be worth marrying, for a woman like you."

"Do you think I value success so highly?"

"No. But I think you would despise failure."

"A failure of folly, of weakness, of fatuous credulity: yes. . . . He mustn't do it. He mustn't be allowed to do it."

"Then you'll help?"

"I'll do what I can."

"If you can't, nobody can."

"Come to see me any time you wish."

"Thank you, Mrs. Westervelt. I'd like to be able to believe," he said wistfully as he shook hands, "that Old Bill Markham has got two friends in the world that aren't looking for anything from him."

She gave him her slow-blossoming smile. "Believe it," she said.

CHAPTER XVII

PANORAMA

I

"Morning, Senator."

"Morning, Senator."

"Have a good night?"

"Quiet and peaceful, thank you."

"No secret service men under the bed?"

"Not last night. Are they after you, too?"

"My mail, mostly."

"Oh, well, they say it's worse in Russia."

"What's all the new activity about?"

"In the language of your own Wild West, it's a round-up. Of votes."

"If they get anything on you, they politely invite you to vote their way. Is that the idea?"

"Exactly. This time they're solidifying their defense against the Welling investigation bill."

"Welling is indicted, I hear."

"Yes, and he's fighting mad. Says he's going to get Lurcock before he's through."

"Nothing'll come of it, I guess."

"Never has, so far. The system is too strong. Give 'em the Attorney-General's office and they can get away with murder. Who's going to prosecute?"

"Murder is right. Look at that hospital case in our

state. They fairly gutted the institution; took everything they could move, down to the tiles on the floor. Condemned and shipped up here for sale."

"That's young Madrigal's game."

"Well, if they had him down there, they'd lynch him. New equipment was supposed to come in, but it didn't come. New patients did, though; a big batch of em' on transfer. It was sickening. There wasn't bedding to cover them, or equipment to handle them, or even soap to keep them clean. We had ten pneumonia deaths from exposure the first week and eighteen the next. Then hell bust loose and there was a mutiny. The medical men couldn't get any satisfaction from the Department here, so they started the Federal District Attorney, a fine young fellow, as straight as they make 'em. He tackled the job for all he was worth—and what did he get for it? Transferred, on orders from the Department of Justice, to some measly little case off in the corner of the state. He got mad and took his troubles to the Big Tent."

"The White House? He had his nerve."

"He got a lot of nice words there. You know the Markham line, with the Markham smile. Everything would be all right. It would be looked after. Such mistakes—for of course they were only mistakes—were most regrettable and everything would be done to set them right. He was not to worry."

"The usual White House stall?"

"Oh, our President probably meant it all. He often means what he says—while he's saying it. But you never can tell how much longer. In this case Dan Lurcock probably got hold of him and showed him the error of stirring up trouble."

"What happened to your young District Attorney?"

"He went back home, quite encouraged. The next day—out! Fired. For the good of the service."

"That's the sort of thing the whist party crowd are pulling all along the line, and getting away with it."

"How long can they go on getting away with it?"

"As long as Dan Lurcock is sitting on the lid. *And* the Big Chief backing him to the limit."

"The Big Chief, eh? What about the Big Chief! How far is he . . . eh?"

"You know the bunch he's always traveled with."

"Yes. But you don't think there has been. . . ? Not cash, over the counter. I'd hate to believe. . . . After all, he's President of the United States."

"You'll vote for the Welling investigation, I suppose, Senator."

"Who? Me? I should say not."

"But if the people in your state are so worked up over the hospital graft—"

"That's all right. But I understand the President is backing Gandy to the limit. You know what that means. I can't afford to be read out of the party and have all my appointments turned down for not obeying orders. The home folks will forget it, quick enough."

"I guess that's right. They forget everything. The public isn't thinking about investigations. It doesn't want to be bothered. Everybody's prosperous, both major league races are close, and they're more interested in the score than in politics. The whole thing will blow over."

"Very likely. Very likely. Going on the floor, Senator?"

"No. I have to meet some constituents."

"See you later then. Good morning, Senator."
"Good-by, Senator."

2

A blithe spirit in the beautifully fitting uniform of a Captain of Marines monologues for the entertainment of a small luncheon party at a fashionable Washington hotel. He is perfectly sober, delightfully ingenuous and unaffectedly pleased with himself and his tale as are, indeed, all his company.

"Hot? You call this hot? You ought to have been in the Texas desert two months ago to appreciate what heat is. . . . What do I know about Texas? That's where I got my shiny new shoulder-straps. The first act began right here in this room. I was sitting over in that corner, holding a highball between my feet, when Duggy Wisner came over and told me the Colonel wanted me to report at once to the Department of Public Health. So I swallowed the rest of my medicine in case they wanted to look at my tongue, and went up there. The Secretary was all ready for me. He said, 'I have got a job for some marines.' I said: 'I'm some marine, myself, sir.' He says: 'We have a sanitarium property in Texas and some trespassers have come on it and are drilling for oil. There's no more oil there than there is in the sole of my foot,' he says. 'But in any case, we want them driven off.' I said: 'Yes, sir. Is that all?' He said, 'What would you do if they served an injunction on you signed by a Federal judge?' I said, 'Mr. Secretary, I have never seen an injunction in my life and wouldn't know one if I saw it, and if they served one on me I would file

it.' He said, 'I guess you will get along all right out there. How soon can you start?' I said, 'As soon as I can draw the expense money.' He said that was fine and I'd better take enough men with me to meet any trouble.

When we got to the railroad terminus in Texas a big, fat, pleasant-spoken guy with his nose all sun-peeled, met us with two cars and handed me a line of instructions and a satchel that gurgled, and said he wasn't going along because it was too damn hot but all we had to do was take possession, and would I give the foreman a drink because he was a good guy, and I said I would. I found the place all right with barbed wire around it and a husky looking native inside it. I said, 'I am the commandant of this navy district.' I assumed that title being the only representative of the Navy Department around there, and somebody had to be commandant so I took the title. 'I am the commandant of his navy district,' I told him, 'and I have orders to stop the work here.' He says, 'Well, I am boss for the Iliad Oil Company and I have orders to keep everybody outside this fence.' I said, 'Well, I have orders here from the Secretary of the Navy that I think will supersede any orders you have.' He looked at the marines. They had rifles and belts full of ammunition. He said, 'I guess you mean business.' I said, 'How long will it take you to stop this work?' He called over another man and talked with him. 'Five minutes,' he told me. I said, 'I'll give you ten.' He asked could they take the small tools and things that might be stolen if they shut down I told him he could take anything he wanted just so he left the ground. To make him feel better I said to him,

'You're only wasting your time anyhow. There is no more oil down there than there is in the sole of my foot.' He said, 'Yes; and this is a navy district and that tin Lizzie of yours is a battleship.' I said, 'Have a drink,' and he said, 'Thanks.' Then I put on a government seal and a 'No Trespassing' sign and came back to report to Secretary Gandy. He asked had they struck oil and I said, No, sir. I guess you were right when you told me there was no more oil there than in the sole of your foot, and I didn't hear anything about any injunction, either.' He laughed. He says, 'You have done a good job and you won't lose by it.' I got my step a month later. At that, the joke was on the Department, I guess, for after they gave up the land some other people came in and went on with the drilling. I understand the pleasant-spoken guy with the peeled nose and the gurgling satchel was in on it.

Well, damf they didn't strike oil within ten days!"

3

"Isn't it too wonderful, Minnie! Two hundred dollars a week bubbling up out of the earth right into my pocket. Maybe it'll come to more than that."

"Well, I don't know as I know anybody I'd rather see have it than you, Burrl."

"That's sweet of you, Minnie. I certainly need it. Keeping up style in the White House is no joke."

"Don't the government give you an allowance to run it on?"

"Yes; but it don't begin to cover just the outside expenses of entertaining."

"The mean things! That's politics, I spose. Tell

me more about the oil well, Burrl, dear. I didn't know the family had any property like that."

"I'm not supposed to say a word about it to anybody. But you being my own cousin—only don't let it get back to the home folks. Not but what it's perfectly open and above board, but folks talk so and get things so twisted. Well, you know Uncle Willis and I had some property out West; old swamp land that nobody ever thought was worth a cent an acre except there were trees on it. Some oil company was looking for timber and we traded with them for a piece of undeveloped property in Texas. They probably thought there wasn't any oil on it, but a friend of mine knew a lot about those things and he advised me; a Mr. Charles Madrigal. He's turribly clever."

"Yes. I've heard of him—and somebody else. Burrl, I do believe you're blushing."

"I *am* not. If I am, Minnie, he's the most fascinating man. Such a line of talk! And smart! He's going to be one of the big men in Washington. Uncle Willis say so. He's devoted to him. So's Charley. I mean they're devoted to each other. Charley—Mr. Madrigal—is reorganizing the hospital system now. He's a turribly busy man but he found time to go 'way down to Texas and engineer that trade for us. Oh, he's sweet!"

"When's the happy event, dearie?"

"Oh, there's nothing in that talk! At least not for quite some time. There's some tangle about his divorce. I don't know just what. Uncle Willis is so delighted; about the oil well, I mean. He gets more out of it than I do; a lot more, because he had a bigger share in the original property. But it's all in my

name and I just turn over his share to him as it comes in. He needs it, too, poor dear!"

"With his salary? I don't see why."

"You don't know what an awful expense it is being President. And he's had such bad luck on Wall Street. You'd think a man in his position would know what was going to happen. But he's been stung such lots of times. Once he had a tip so straight that he made me play it, and even that went wrong. And what do you think he did? He gave me back every cent I lost, and a lot of his friends, too."

"How lovely of him!"

"I'll say it was! Oh, I keep forgetting about slang. Now that I'm mistress of the White House I'm supposed to cut it out. Anyway Mr. Madrigal was one of the men that lost and Uncle Willis made good for him. He told me about it with tears in his eyes, almost—he's so tender and good-hearted—and he said that he was going to see that Old Bill got it back and more too. They all call Uncle Willis that. Don't you think it's *sweet?* That's why he fixed up the trade for the oil lands. But Uncle Willis doesn't know any of the details. Charley said not to bother him with them; he has too much on his mind as it is. So we just got him to sign the papers giving me power to act or something, and that's all there was to it."

"It's just like a fairy tale, Burrl."

"Isn't it! The very first thing I did when I got the good news, I sent up to Croswell & Ponte's on 57th Street in New York—they're the swell milliners, you know; turribly chick—and had them send down two dozen of their vurry smartest hats for me to pick from. If you'll come into the other room I've just got time to show you."

4

"Mr. Bray in?"

"What name?"

"Tell him Mr. Gallison."

"From the Texas law firm? You're to go right in, sir. . . ."

"Good morning, Mr. Bray."

"Morning, Gallison. Look here; am I president of the Iliad Oil Company or ain't I?"

"You certainly are."

"And are you watching out for our interests in the northern district or ain't you?"

"I am."

"Then why haven't you reported to me on that Sundered Hill boring?"

"Because, sir, I've only just gathered all the facts."

"The important fact is that they've struck oil there. Isn't that so?"

"It is."

"Well, what have you done about it?"

"Nothing."

"We were run out of there unfairly and illegally. That marine business was an outrage. That land belongs to us and I want it back. Get into court as fast as the next train will take you back and get action."

"The land once belonged to us, certainly, but—"

"Our claim is as good now as it ever was, and I'm going to get it back or there's going to be a fight."

"With whom?"

"With whoever it is that took it over after that crook, Gandy, dropped it."

"You mean the present holder?"

"That's who I mean. Go after the son-of-a-bitch."

"It isn't a son-of-a-bitch. It's a woman.

"A *woman?*"

"Exactly. Mrs. Beryl L. Hartley."

"Who the hell is she?"

"The niece of the President."

"*Jeest!*"

"Well, Mr. Bray; what are my instructions?"

"Forget it."

5

"Hello, sweetie."

"'Lo, Cholly."

"How's the little Zoa this bright and beautiful morning?"

"Feeling swell."

"Got a li'l kiss for the old boy?"

"Have a heart, Cholly. 'Private Office,' don't mean it's as private as all that. The Superintendent of Sales for the Department of Public Health don't want to be snapshotted in a petting party with his new stenog."

"Private secretary, sweetie; private secretary. Besides, who's doing any snapshotting around here?"

"I don't know who they are, but there's quite a few of those click-the-shutter lads been around lately."

"The damn yellow newspapers, I reckon."

"Maybe, says Baby. One of 'em was asking some questions about when the freight on that siding was going to be unloaded."

"That's our business. Between you and me, it isn't going to be unloaded. It's going on to Detroit."

"It's new stuff, direct from the mills, isn't it?"

"Not on our records, it isn't. 'Soiled in storage;' that's its little label."

"Aren't you even going to store it, just for the bluff?"

"Why waste the time? We're getting a nice price for it. And the Detroit people are getting a nice profit. Always let the other party to a deal get his bit and then everybody's satisfied. . . . How's the little old new car go, sweetie?"

"Swell. I'm crazy about it. You're awfully good to me, ol' boy-friend."

"Well, you've been pretty good to me, haven't you? No need to get pink about it."

"Cholly, you're a bad boy and I'm kind of crazy about you."

"Atta-baby!"

"Kinda worried too. Aren't you taking some pretty long chances?"

"Life's all chance, but nothing's dangerous if you go at it right."

"I don't believe those camera-snoopers are reporters, Cholly. I think they've been sent by someone up on the Hill."

"Don't you worry, honeybunch. The Old Man isn't going to let his friends be razzed and his administration mussed up to make capital for a bunch of cheap demagogues. Nobody wants any trouble except that little group of head-hunters."

"Well, I'm only telling you what I hear underground."

"I know. And your wires are pretty good, at that. Girlie, if it'll make your necklace fit any easier I'll tell you something. I've got an ace in the hole."

"Ye-ah? What kind?"

"I guess I can trust you."

"You oughta know."

"Well, I'm going to take a chance."

"I guess you got a right to trust me further than I can trust you."

"How do you get that way? What's the idea now?"

"Those other girls you play around with."

"Nothing doing, since I found you."

"So you tell me. What about that fat widow-slob up at the Automat?"

"The *what?* . . . Oh, that's what you wise-cracking department kids call the White House, is it? What's the answer?"

"Because you can drop in your money and get anything you want for it."

"Come off that stuff."

"Well, that's what they claim. What are *you* getting for your nickle? Fat Burrl?"

"Aw, you know, sweetie, I have to stand in with the White House. She's part of the stand-in. She's only a jolly."

"And I suppose that owl-eyed black-brunette wife of your pal, Duke Forrest, is another jolly. She's a good-looker; I'll give her that. In her way."

"I know a better looker."

"Another jolly."

"No; it isn't. I'm off her. Honest. That's all over."

"Not that I care. I'm not the jealous kind. Only—"

"There ain't any only about it, sweetie. You're the only-only, as far as I'm concerned, and I'm going to prove it to you by letting you in on my big secret. In fact, you're part of it. Look here, kiddie; I'm coming up to the apartment to-night—"

"Oh, Cholly: I don't believe—to-night—"

"Now, *listen*. This is business. Serious. I'm going to fix up a last of defense with you, in case there should be any trouble. First I'm going to phone over to Balto and engage a couple of safe deposit boxes in your name. One of 'em we'll keep for office records that are more or less private. The other I'm going to fill with T. N. T."

"T. N. T.? Cholly!"

"T. N. T. in good, plain type. That's what we're going to fix up this evening at your apartment. I'm going to dictate a statement to you that'll have enough high explosive in it to blow the whole administration to hell. That's for the other box."

"I don't get the idea."

"You will. Suppose things got to looking stormy and they were figuring on a goat and picked me for the part. I've known such tricks turned in politics. I go to the higher-ups and tell them; 'Unless you see me through this, there's a mine planted that'll lift the lid so high it'll never go back on again.' Exhibit A, a certain ranch purchase; Exhibit B, a couple of extra-raw pardons and some liquor deals, Exhibit C, a little turn in oil with the U. S. Marines. 'What about it?' I'll say. And they'll come through. Don't you believe for a minute but what they'll come through. They're all in it."

"Cholly! Who?"

"Guess as wide as you like and as high as you like. You won't go wrong. You'll see it all to-night in your own typing. Except the names. I'm using numbers for the present instead of names. Later I'll give you the key."

"I'm scared. What would happen if you do spill the stuff?"

"You tell me and I'll tell you. But it won't be necessary. It's only for emergency use and the emergency isn't likely to come. Nothing to get scared over. We'll get out six or seven copies of the outline, seal 'em up, and plant 'em in the second safety deposit box. There they stay unless I tell you to deliver them to somebody."

"I don't like it. It makes me feel creepy."

"Don't be a sap. Haven't I put you wise that it's just to have something to trade on in case things should go cock-eyed? But if ever I should get so corked up that I couldn't even get word to you, then remember that you've got the Big Bertha and use it where you think it will do the most good. You're a wise kid and you can judge. But stand from under for the roof'll go right off."

"Isn't there somebody I could go to and ask about it? Dan Lurcock?"

"No. If it came to a blow-up he'd be against me."

"The President?"

"N-o-o-o-o-. Not unless— No; lay off him."

"Cholly Madrigal! Will *he* be in it, too?"

"You tell me and I'll tell you. I think if you listened around on the Hill you might find out where you'd get the most action. Most likely from one of the other crowd."

"Welling?"

"I wouldn't wonder."

"Now I *know* it's a dangerous game you're in, Cholly. When are you going to quit it?"

"When I've cleaned up a cool million. Cross my heart and take you to Paris, chickie."

6

"Dan, I don't like it."

"It's all right, Bill. Everything's all *right*."

"There's a lot too much talk going on."

"Talk! What's talk? Now just don't you worry—"

"Worry? By God I've got to worry!"

"I'm telling you there's nothing to get het up about."

"Not for you. You aren't the one it'll come back on. You're not President."

"No. Haven't got the front for it."

"It's me the Party will hold responsible for what's going on."

"Well, what *is* going on?"

"That's what I want you to tell me."

"If it's that rat, Welling, that's on your mind, we've got him by the short hairs. How much stock will the public take in his charges, now that he's under indictment? We've passed the quiet word on the Hill and his motion will be referred to a committee that'll bury it so deep it'll never be heard of again. A hell of a front for a reformer he's got!"

"Dan, I never knew a reformer yet that wouldn't take his bit if he thought nobody was looking."

"Sure! They're worse than we are."

"Well, you be good and sure there aren't any loose ends hanging out. I'm not going to have my administration smirched. There'll be hell raised with somebody if I find any funny business going on."

"Now, look here, Bill; you know as well as I do that politics is no Purity League. You'll always find a few pigs running wild in the trough and a few muckrakers ready to make a mountain out of a molehill. I

won't say but what they might dig up some minor stuff. But as far as anything that could be tied up to the administration goes, that's all the bunk. If Welling does try to start anything it'll be either against Gandy or Guy or me."

"It'll be Gandy."

"On those transfers of the hospital equipment, eh?"

"That's my information."

"Well, we've rounded all that up."

"I've wanted to look into it but I haven't had the time. A President doesn't get time for anything. What have you found out?"

"It's absolutely all right, Bill."

"Whee—ew! That's a relief. I'll admit, Dan, I was worried by some of the things that have been hinted at. Not that I believed that Charley Madrigal or Andy would really let me down. I know my friends."

"Have you considered that suggestion I made about a statement from you?"

"What was that, Dan? My head gets into a blur with all the things I have to carry."

"Some kind of a statement from you—a letter if you like—saying that every action taken by the Secretary of Public Health in the hospital equipment transfers was taken with your knowledge and approval."

"Think it's safe, Dan? It's pretty sweeping. Of course Gandy is all right, but—"

"It all rests on Madrigal. He's had a free hand. His figures check up all right. Unless you've got some reason for not trusting him—"

"Not me. He's one hundred per cent with me. There isn't a better fellow in the world than Charley."

"Well, the statement from you will cinch the fate

of Welling's investigation. At that, we might not have to use it at all."

"All right. You go ahead and get it out the way you think it ought to be, and I'll sign it provided Andy can clear up one little matter that's outside the Department. I guess he can all right. He's coming around later to settle it."

"Anything more, Mr. President?"

"No, Dan. Much obliged."

"See you at the whist party to-morrow evening?"

"Sure."

"So long, Bill."

" Good-by, Dan. . . . God, I'd like to get an hour's sleep!"

7

"Good evening, Mr. President."

"Good evening, Andy."

"I've brought Sig McBride with me."

"So I see. How are you, Sig?"'

"Fine, Mr. President. I understand you wanted to see me."

"Why, no, Sig. Always glad to see you, but there wasn't anything special."

"Andy, here, said—"

"Wait a minute, Sig. Lemme do the talking. Sig's the third party, Mr. President. He's the man that lent me the money for the ranch deal."

"That's right. Ninety thousand simoleons."

"Well, well, well! If you boys had only told me that in the first place, there wouldn't have been any question."

"No reason why Andy couldn't have told *you*. I

asked him to keep his mouth shut. A feller with money has to be pretty goldarn cagey about how he lets his business affairs get known; so I told Andy it was confidential. But you were welcome to know any time. I brought along the notes."

"That's all right! That's all *right*. There's a load off my mind. Hope you make a good thing of the ranch with the cigar name. How about a little drink, boys?"

"Suits me, Bill."

"Don't care if I do, Mr. President."

"Happy days."

"Happy days."

8

"Hello. . . . Hello! . . . This is Mrs. Forrest. . . . Yes; I want Mr. Madrigal. Tell him it's important. . . . Hello, Charley? This is Bonnie. Charley, I've got to see you. . . . No; to-day. You can't slant me off. . . . I've been hearing about your little trip to Texas. . . . Yes; I got it straight. . . . Ye-ah; your private secretary. I know what kind of secretary! . . . No; you've got to come through and you've got to come clean or everything is off. . . . I tell you, that bluff won't go. When will you. . . . Look out. Duke's at the door. Call me later. Shut off. . . .

" . . . . Hello, Duke. Didn't expect you back so soon."

"Who's that you were talking with?"

"Nobody. I was trying to date up a massage for to-morrow."

"Who's that you were talking with?"

"See here, Duke Forrest. Don't think you can get

rough with me because I'm your wife. I don't have to stand for that stuff."

"It was Madrigal, wasn't it?"

"No; it wasn't."

"You lie."

"All right. I lie, then."

"I've got the goods on you and him. You thought you were putting it over on me but you weren't. He's had you till he's sick of you and now he's chucked you for a red-headed little tart that he lifted out of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, and he's living with her on Nth Street."

"What do I care if he is? It's a lie about his having me."

"Oh, cut out the hooey! You were in Baltimore with him in May. In June it was New York. Last winter it was Norfolk a couple of times. Do you want a list of the hotels?"

"All right. I don't care. I don't care about anything. It's all true and I wish I was dead. . . . What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to fix that rat."

"How?"

"Wait and see. I'm half drunk now and I'm going to be all drunk before long. And when that's over I'm going to fix Madrigal."

"I don't give a damn. I don't. I *don't!* I hope you kill him—kill him—*kill* him!"

"For God's sake, clam up. Do you want to get us thrown out of the hotel?"

"I don't care. What's the difference? To hell with everything, you and him, too. He took me away from you right under your eyes. And then he canned me for that cheap little painted chippy. If it was Mrs.

Hartley I could have stood it; he wanted to marry her for what there was in it for him. He was never stuck on her. But that other lit— What are you looking for in that drawer, Duke?"

"My gun."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WOMAN IN POLITICS

The White House has an inner life of its own, made up of those who constitute its mechanism. These people know more about the President than all the politicians do. In their obscure way they can do much to hamper or to ease him in his daily routine, according as they like or dislike him. They adored Willis Markham for his kindliness, his intimate consideration, his sunny manners, his unfeigned personal interest in them, and his total lack of "side." Secrets were safe in their keeping, and they knew many. They knew, for example, without the President telling them, that any communication from Mrs. Westervelt would take precedence over the messages of the mighty of the world.

Such word came the morning before Senator Welling was to offer his resolution. Could the President arrange to see Mrs. Westervelt sometime that day? Willis Markham turned to his secretary. There was not an hour, not half an hour, not ten minutes unclaimed by some important appointment. The President snapped out an expletive of impatience and rebellion. Into the receiver he said: "I'll come whenever you say. . . . Four-thirty? I'll be there. . . . Frothingham, tell Secretary Maxson that I'm called away on imperative business and can't see him until to-morrow."

Through the rest of the day's duties his ardent mind played about the thought that, for the first time, Edith Westervelt had sent for him. Surely that marked an advance in their intimacy, for she knew how much time meant to a President, and she was not the woman to demand without being ready to give in return. What could it be? Something that she wanted of him? He hoped so. He could imagine no request of hers that he would refuse. Though, for that matter, he could imagine offhand no request that she was likely to make.

The reality was a disappointment, for the moment. She came to the point at once.

"It it true that you are going to give Secretary Gandy an endorsement?"

"Who's been telling tales out of school?" he returned with the good humored and slightly bantering tone which expressed his feeling about women meddling in politics.

"I can't give you the source of my information. Is it true?"

"It was an endorsement of him to appoint him, wasn't it?"

"Oh, Willis! Please don't evade. You've been asked for a specific statement in his behalf, haven't you?"

"Something of the sort."

"You mustn't give it to him."

"Still got your mind on that ranch deal? He's explained all that and proved up on his explanation."

"It isn't that alone. For your own sake I beg you not to authorize that statement."

"What's the idea, Edith?"

"I'm certain it will make trouble, later. Anyway, wait until you have investigated his department."

"It's already been investigated. Everything is O. K."

"Who says so?"

"Dan Lur—The Department of Justice."

"Isn't there some one you could trust to look into it privately and report to you?" she insisted. "Some one you can trust implicitly?"

"I can trust Dan. To the limit. When those secret service bloodhounds don't find anything, you can bet it's because there's nothing to find."

With a desperate quiet she said: "Will you do this for me? I've never asked you for anything before."

"Sure, if you feel that way about it." He spoke amiably, almost negligently, with the sole intention of pleasing and pacifying her. Why tell her that the statement was already in the hands of an administration spokesman? It would only make needless trouble. His attitude toward women was "Anything to keep 'em happy." He understood, all right, what she was after though he could not imagine who had prompted her to it. She was putting his devotion to the test, playing prettily at power. Women were like that. They exact pledges for the pleasure of asserting their sway and then forget them when shown how foolish they are. So far was Willis Markham, the man, from comprehension of Edith Westervelt, the woman.

He smiled at her, sunnily. She meant so kindly. He loved her for her attempted protection of his interests. But her information was all wrong, and later when she understood that the statement had already been issued at the time when she asked him not to make it, she would see that he was justified and laughingly forgive him.

"You win," he added. "What's the loser's end of the purse?"

"I don't think I understand."

He took her hand. "What do I get for it?"

She raised her face to his kiss, docilely enough, but there was acquiescence rather than response in her lips.

"Is that all?" he said.

"What do you want?"

His voice dropped. "Everything. You must know that. I'm starved for you. I can't sleep for thinking of you. I can't work for wanting you."

The troubled sweetness of her eyes did not evade his. "I know. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say to you, Willis. There's so much to be considered."

"Nothing to be considered but ourselves," he said fiercely.

'Oh, yes! Still—I suppose—not now, but sometime, later, if you want what little I have to give——"

"Want you? My God! Listen, Edith. This sounds—well—heartless, but things aren't going to be as they are with me, very much longer. When the time comes—will you marry me?"

She smiled wanly. "That's a harder question than the other."

"But, good Lord, Edith! I'm President. I'll be President then, after the mourning period is over, after your divorce is completed——"

"Yes; I know. But let's not talk of it now."

"I want to talk of it," he returned with obstinancy.

"You'd find me a difficult wife."

"Difficult, how?"

"I shouldn't be very tolerant of your present way of life, I'm afraid," said she with forced lightness.

"The whist parties? A fellow can't work all the time."

"No. Of course not. But it's the kind of men that go there."

"What's the matter with them?" he returned in honest surprise. "If you knew 'em you wouldn't say that. There isn't a better lot of fellows anywhere."

The hopelessness of the attempt was apparent to her. She abandoned it with a slight, surrendering gesture. Eagerly, persuasively he continued: "If I was married to you I wouldn't want to go out nights. You couldn't drive me out."

"Old habits," she murmured.

"Can't you see it's just because I'm lonely?' he cried. "I get so that I feel like the White House was a jail. What else is there you don't like about me?"

"Do you really want me to tell you?"

"Yes. I'll take anything from you."

"Well—the drinking."

"You think I drink too much? Maybe I do."

"Anything is too much."

"Oh, come off, Edith! I've got a head like a rock."

"It isn't that. In your position I think you ought not to drink at all."

"But you do."

"I'm not President of the United States. You are. You've sworn to uphold the laws. If you violate them, how can you expect others to respect them?"

"Who expects anybody to respect the dry law! Nobody you know does, except officially, of course."

"Last week you gave the dedication address at the Temperance Temple. I read it. You said——"

"But, good God, Edith!" he broke in, painedly. "That was just for effect. You have to play up to

those people. Everybody knows it's just guff. They do, themselves, I guess. They wouldn't really care, if they did know I took a drink once in awhile. The principle is all they care about. It's the principle that's important. I wouldn't drink in public, of course; not any more than I'd stick my head in a hornet's nest."

"But if it should become known?"

"How could it? They never could prove it on me. If anything was ever said, my friends would come to the front and swear it was all lies and malicious gossip."

She looked at him strangely. "And you would let them?"

"Well, for God's sake, why not? Whose business is it if I take a drink quietly, by myself, or with a few friends?" If it were anybody but Edith he would have been quite annoyed by her unreasonableness. "You might give me a cocktail, now, if you wanted to be very nice to me."

"Certainly. I beg your pardon," she replied. And he took that for acceptance of his point of view!

As he bade her goodby, after the drink, she murmured: "Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for sending for me," he returned, adding, "It'll be all right about Gandy, sweet."

She took this for a promise. So far was Edith Westervelt, the woman, from comprehension of Willis Markham, the politician.

Down at the Crow's Nest Dan Lurcock and Jeff Sims were deep in confabulation.

"I don't like it, Jeff. She's too damn good-lookin'."

"If you like that style," conceded the other.

"And too much brains."

"What does she want with Bill?"

"What do you suppose! To get her hooks on him, of course. His wife is pretty near the end."

"You don't think Bill'd marry her!" cried Jeff Sims.

"I wouldn't put it past him. He's cuckoo over her."

"But I thought you said she wasn't straight."

"That's what I heard. She was living with some guy somewhere in Europe after she left her husband."

"Jeest! And Bill would marry her after that?"

"Ain't it hell!" mourned Dan Lurcock with the shaken head of moral reprobation.

A passing vision brought something back to the mind of Jeff Sims. "By the way, Dan. Didja ever hear anything further from that frail with the pink hat that came beefin' around here last spring?"

"Oh, her!" replied the upholder of morals negligently. "I had her run out of the District."

The Sims intellect turned in another direction. "Have they got Welling licked, do you think?"

"They will have when Benson springs it on the Senate that the Old Man is back of Andy."

"Good business! I guess some of the stuff they've pulled down there is pretty raw."

"It's that big horse's rump of a Charley Madrigal. As soon as this blows over, he's going to be told where he gets off."

"Will he take it?"

"He's got to take it," snarled the unofficial Attorney-General of the United States.

"He's pretty close to the Old Man."

"Because Bill isn't onto him. Why, the Department has got enough on him to send him up for a century."

"He knows more than I wish he knew," admitted

"But you can't use it, eh?"

Lurcock. "If he turned sour he might make trouble.

But he's got to change his style or he'll have us all in wrong."

Up in the White House, a President sat, dreaming dreams of loftier things. He who had so long prided himself on his practicality, was now glimpsing the roseate cloud-forms of a nascent idealism. To this had Edith Westervelt inspired him. Edith who might one day come to love him, to give her wonderful self to him. With her as his guide and star he would go in for the higher statesmanship. He would study world problems. He would devise a tax system which should be a model for future generations. He would perfect his scheme for the pan-brotherhood of the Western republics; the "Markham Entente," historians would call it. He would arrange something statesmanlike and helpful for the vociferous farmers, satisfy the agricultural bloc, so healing the breach in his party. He would—he would—what was there that he might not do with the priceless Edith by his side!

Meantime Duke Forrest, who for days had been getting drunker and drunker, was now growing soberer and soberer.

CHAPTER XIX

A PLEASANT LITTLE GAME

High revelry was the order of the night at the Crow's Nest. The whist party roster was almost complete: Fosgate, Gandy, Madrigal, Sig McBride, Lurcock and Willis Markham. In honor of Handy Andy Gandy the stakes had been doubled and the drinks trebled, for the Secretary of Public Health had completely routed the foe. Welling's resolution for an investigation of the Department had been referred, amidst open derision, not to its proper committee but to the Committee on Highways and By-ways of the District of Columbia, a process known as "running it up the lane." There it would die a lingering and unlamented death.

For a time, the issue had been doubtful. Welling's accusations were forceful and damaging, but he had let his rancor get the better of him, and his exposition of himself as a martyr to the powers of graft and darkness had weakened his cause. With victory in the balance, Senator Benson, an old line party man, rose and fired the big gun. In the fewest possible words he delivered a statement (referring to a written slip of paper by way of suggesting conscientious exactitude) to the effect that the procedure of Secretary Gandy and the Department of Public Health had been initiated and carried through with the full knowledge and approval of the President of the United States. This

comprehensive certification by the leader of the party whipped in the members like so many well-trained hounds. To support the resolution after that would have been to repudiate the President.

"Did you see Welling's face when he heard it," giggled Sig McBride, who had been in the gallery. "Goldarned if I didn't think he was going to bust."

"Atta-boy, Bill!" said Andy Gandy, who was pardonably drunk.

"Bill's the lad that sticks by his friends," put in Charley Madrigal.

"They can't put anything over on him," declared Dan Lurcock.

Willis Markham beamed affectionately upon the circle of his chosen cronies. "I'd be a yellow dog if I didn't stick by my friends. They stick by me."

Only Tim Fosgate sat silent and glum. Gandy hit him a resounding thwack across the shoulders. "Come on, old crab! Have a drink and cheer up."

"It's your deal," said Tim Fosgate.

"What'll you do with the case against Welling?" McBride asked Lurcock as Gandy fumbled out the cards.

"Let it sleep."

"As long as he's good, eh?"

"Yeh."

"He's a dead dog," opined McBride contemptuously. "He'll never yap again."

"I'm passing," said Fosgate.

"Pass."

"Opened," said the President of the United States. "This is my lucky night."

In the doorway back of him a figure appeared silently, and silently stood. Henry Forrest had sobered

up. But the dregs of three days' debauch were poison in his body and venom in his soul. His eyes were red and strained. His lips twitched.

"Pass," said Madrigal. "Hello, Duke."

"I'm in for fifty." Gandy's yellow chip made good the statement. "Why, there's the Duke! Sell him a stand of chips, Mr. Banker."

"I'll hike it," announced Fosgate. "I feel a flush coming on."

"One more raise," chuckled Willis Markham. "That's what a lion-hearted opener thinks of your flush."

"Hell!" said Lurcock. "That's what I think of your raise."

The handsome Duke moved forward until he stood at Fosgate's shoulder, facing Madrigal.

"The opener bets the limit," said Markham when his turn came around.

Fosgate sidled a glance upward at Forrest's face and moved his chair back, reaching for a bottle to fill his glass and keeping it in his hand when the process was completed. Forrest said in a quiet voice, to Madrigal:

"You stole my wife, you bastard."

Madrigal's eyes protruded. His lip became pendulous. "Wh-wh-what's eating you, Duke?"

"And I'm going to fix you for it."

The gun gleamed in his hand. Andy Gandy, bad man and killer, tactfully dived beneath the table.

"Drop it!" barked Willis Markham, and at the same moment Fosgate struck sharply and accurately upward. The smoke spurted from the pistol barrel. Charles Madrigal crumpled in his chair. The bullet had gone

into an upper corner of the wall. Mr. Madrigal had incontinently fainted.

A triple human whirlwind entered the room, knocking men and furniture right and left to reach the President. The secret service guardians were on the job. Forrest was pinned. A smash in the face stunned him, smeared him with blood.

"Are you all right, Mr. President?"

"Yes." Willis Markham had his wits about him. "No harm done. Accident. Get out of here, boys."

"No, sir." The senior guard was respectful but firm.

"Not while he's here." A second indicated Forrest.

Somebody poured a Scotch highball over the head of Madrigal, who came to and said frantically but feebly: "It's a goddam lie." Handy Andy Gandy righted himself and reappeared.

"Get out, boys," repeated the President. "He's safe."

"I've got his gun," said Jeff Sims, who had run in from the rear room.

"I think we'd better take him along, sir," insisted the head Secret Service man.

"Nothing of the sort. I'll look after him."

Reluctantly the trio withdrew, but no further than the hallway.

"Now, Henry," said Willis Markham authoritatively: "are you sober enough to listen to common sense?"

Forrest wiped his face with the breadth of his hand. He spat and a tooth fell upon the table, hopped once and laid a smear upon the faced trey of clubs.

"I don't want to talk to you," he muttered. His

voice smouldered with fury. His eyes burned upon Madrigal.

"You got nothing on me," disclaimed that gentleman virtuously.

"I've got her word."

"Bonnie's? Your wife's?"

"She's no wife of mine. Take your whore and beat it out of the country if you want to save your life."

"Shut up, Forrest. You've said enough," growled Lurcock.

"Oh, have I! I've got enough on you to send you to jail. You, too, Gandy. And Madrigal! Oh, what I won't do to him before I'm through! You bunch of rotten, cheap, grafters."

"That's enough, Forrest," commanded the President of the United States.

The man turned upon him the glare of his bloodlust. "And you, you fat piffle! You know what they call you in the Department? 'Easy Markham!' Why they make a monkey of you every time the clock strikes—" He stopped, guggling, for Jeff Sims' big forearm was under his chin, pressing on his throat.

Gandy said in a quick whisper to Lurcock: "My God! If he splits!" To which Lurcock returned a hushed and savage, "Shut your face, you fool!"

"What'll we do with him?" asked McBride nervously.

"We can't let him out of here in this state."

"What's the matter with putting him in the rear alley room for the night?" suggested Jeff Sims.

"Good idea. He'll feel different in the morning."

"I'll say he will," said Dan Lurcock grimly, "after I've had a talk with him."

The frail, dull-eyed, middle-aged woman who acted

as housekeeper appeared. If she had heard the fracas, her stolid face gave no sign of it. Alone of the perturbed gathering the President greeted her, and she replied with her frosty and reluctant smile. Yes; the back room was ready; she would take up fresh towels at once.

Suddenly Duke Forrest spoke, in an altered voice. "I'm sorry, Mr. President. I've made a fool of myself. Let me get to bed and I'll be all right."

Jeff Sims escorted him. Presently he returned with the news that he had locked him into his room.

"Dan'll put the fear of God into him in the morning, won't you, Dan?"

"He'll be good before I'm through with him," promised Lurcock.

Willis Markham looked ruefully at the disarray of scrambled hands upon the table. "That was a blow," he announced with mock pathos. "First full house I've held to-night, too."

It was after three when he got back to his room. The major domo who had been sitting up for him handed him a telegram. It was from New York, where Edith Westervelt had gone for a visit. It read:

> "Evening papers say you endorsed G. Cannot believe this true in view of our talk. Return Thursday.
>
> E."

Thursday! Two more days before he would see her. The implied intimacy of the message warmed him much more than its purport disturbed him. He wrote out a wire to be despatched in the morning:

> "Statement unauthorized. Had been issued before our talk, but use of it not authorized. Will explain when I see you on Thursday.
>
> W."

That would be all right. When she understood how splendidly the endorsement had worked, she would be ready to justify his little deception if, eventually, he decided to tell her. Perhaps he'd better not, though. She was funny about some things. Touchy. Tell 'em as little as you can; that was the best policy with women. Anyway, she had no kick coming. He hadn't lied to her. Through that cloudiness of mind that beset him whenever he tried to understand the complex (to him) motivations of her character, shone a clear, reassuring recollection of what he had said. He had told her, "It'll be all right, about Gandy." And it *was* all right about Gandy. She would see that for herself, when he had a chance to explain. She couldn't help but see it. He fell asleep, complacently at ease with the world.

The bed telephone, which was permitted to ring only in emergency, woke him untimely. Through the window he could see that the sun was not yet up. Fosgate's voice said cautiously:

"That you, Chief?"

"Yes."

"It's Tim. Forrest killed himself sometime in the night."

"God. . . . How?"

"Shot. Through the head. Must have got his gun back some way."

"That's terrible. . . . Come up here, will you, Tim?"

"Be up right away. Good-by."

Willis Markham incongruously saw a tooth lying upon a smeared trey of clubs.

CHAPTER XX

A LETTER TO A LADY

How important a figure she had become in the inner circles of politics, Edith Westervelt realized anew, when on her return from New York, she found in her mail a letter in a nervous, unknown hand, beginning: "You do not know me, but I am writing you because it is the only sure way in which I can reach the President."

A favor-begging letter, she thought, and put it aside. The signature "Henry V. D. Forrest" meant nothing to her. As always, the implication of her preponderant influence over Willis Markham inspired in her a definite uneasiness and a faint distaste. Somewhere in history she had read of the Mormon custom of "sealing" women to their prospective mates. She felt as if she were being sealed to Willis Markham by a process of indefinable pressure, and without her own volition. What her future course would be, she had not yet decided. Her visit to New York had been undertaken partly for the purpose of getting away from him, from the Washington atmosphere, through the irradiated prism of which it was impossible to get a just estimate of him.

She went through the rest of her mail; found in it a letter from him, reproachful and lover-like. Why had she stayed away so long? There was no reference to the Gandy episode. He was leaving that for

verbal explanation, evidently. Having read the remainder of the correspondence she turned to the Forrest letter. It was dismayingly bulky. But after the first paragraph she read with increasing absorption. It was a direct, historical exposition of the activities of Charles M. Madrigal in the disposal of the hospital equipment taken over by the Department of Public Health. It gave chapter, verse, and date with dry and deadly precision. It suggested a brief list of questions for the President to put to Madrigal, if he doubted the accuracy of the Forrest record. One item thrust itself upon her special notice because of its ludicrous incongruity with the gravity of the indictment:—½ car-load roach powder: cost $4,180.00 stated selling price $2,960: actual selling price $1,160.00: rake off to Madrigal $1,350.

The total of Madrigal's graft as reckoned up by the unknown correspondent came to more than $90,000.

At the close of the letter the writer had dipped into personalities. "If the President does not want to justify his nickname of 'Easy Markham,' it is time he got onto himself and onto the gang that is making a sucker of him. While you are about it you might let Mrs. Beryl Hartley know that her swell suitor is living with a girl named Zoa Farley in an Nth Street Apartment, third door from Gorham Avenue."

"Easy Markham." The contemptuous cheapness of the phrase struck a venomed fang into her pride in Willis Markham, her hope of what, under her influence, he might be molded to become. A gull, a dupe, a smiling, silly, soft-hearted slack-spirited sham; a-a-what was the word she sought, a word she had once heard him use?—boob. That was it. A boob! That was the true character of Willis Markham, the peo-

ple's idol—until he should be discovered. Then their laughter would be lightning to shatter his career. His happy and enthusiastic voice echoed in her memory: "Charley's a prince. . . . Best pal in the world. . . . You'd be crazy about him. . . . One of those fellows you know you can bank on." . . . Roach powder: rake-off to Madrigal $1,350. Ugh!

There had been a hint in the letter, too, that the Madrigal scandal was only one of many which would inevitably come to light sooner or later, unless that grafter were promptly attended to. What of it?—thought Edith Westervelt, with a profound nausea of the spirit. Willis Markham was not worth saving from his own self-assured and invincible folly. Yet a steadfastness of loyalty within herself told her that she must do what she could. She owed that to his belief in her. For once in his be-gulled life he should see that he had trusted the right person.

Some doubt of the letter held her. She would like to know something about the writer. She thought of Tim Fosgate. He could probably tell her. She called up the Treasury Department and within fifteen minutes Fosgate had arrived. His first word was: "We failed in the Gandy matter."

"I want to ask you about that, too."

He made a grimace, "The President has put all his eggs in one basket and given the basket to Andy Gandy to carry. Pray God Andy doesn't stub his toe."

"Did the President really authorize the statement in the papers?"

Her visitor looked faintly surprised. "I suppose so. It didn't look like kite-flying. Too definite."

"What is kite-flying?"

"It's usually done through the newspapers. The

President wants to find out what the public reaction to a certain course will be, so he sees to it that the newspapers report him as intending to take such-and-such an action or appoint So-and-so to some office. Then if there's too much of a kick, he disavows the statement. Says it wasn't authorized and he never had any such idea."

Her nostrils wrinkled. "Do you tell me that Willis Markham would do such a thing?"

"Why, of course! Why not? All Presidents do."

"It's dishonest," said she indignantly.

"It isn't so regarded. Not in politics."

"Then politics is dishonest."

"Well, it isn't hot-house rose-gardening, and that's a fact," he admitted.

"You are satisfied that he did authorize the statement supporting Secretary Gandy?"

"Of course."

"I can't believe it." She had become white beneath the eyes.

"Why not?"

"He gave me his word in this very room that he would not."

It was now Tim Fosgate's turn to be shocked. "Oh, no! You must have misunderstood him. Bill wouldn't go back on anything he said."

"But you've just told me he would."

"That's politics. That's all in the game. But not to a friend. Not to *you*."

She shook her head. With more despair and disgust than anger in her tone she said: "A liar as well as a dupe. He has no friend in me, any longer."

"Don't say that!" pleaded Fosgate in consternation. "He's under a terrible strain. He may have slipped

in this Gandy business. Gandy's such an old pal of his. But give him a chance to explain. If he loses you now—well, I don't know what'll happen to him."

"He's lost me," she said quietly, "so far as one can lose what one has never really had. I sent for you to read this letter."

He went through it rapidly his face graver and graver as he read, his eyes more and more anxious. "That's bad," he commented. "That's very bad."

"Did you know of it?"

"I suspected something of the sort."

He set himself to a re-perusal of the missive. With a troubled and thoughtful face he said: "There's no hint of suicide in that."

She was startled. "Suicide? Why should there be?"

"Haven't you seen the papers?"

"Not for two days. I've been motoring by a round-about route."

"Duke Forrest was found with a bullet through his head in the Blue Street house after a poker game."

She had an instinctive movement of recoil from the letter. Presently she asked: "Did he kill himself?"

"His revolver was by the bathtub where they found him."

"What did the inquest show?"

"There was no inquest."

"What? I thought there always was in such cases."

"There is, ordinarily. This wasn't an ordinary case."

"Do they think— Has there been any hint? The newspapers?"

Fosgate shook his head. "They wouldn't dare. Too close to the President. The Secret Service is supposed

to have investigated. Under Dan Lurcock." He looked thoughtfully at the sheets of broad-written paper before him. "I wonder if he wrote any other letters?"

"To whom should he write?"

"Well—Welling, for instance."

"If that is probable Willis ought to have this letter as soon as possible, oughtn't he?"

"I—think—so."

"Shall I call a messenger and send it to the White House?"

"By no means. Don't think of it. We'll take no such chances. I'll carry the message to him myself if you'll trust me so far."

"Of course I trust you," she answered simply. Then in a sort of cry, "One has to trust some one!"

"That'll be all right," was his quiet rejoinder as he took up his slouchy hat.

"What do you think will happen when he reads it?"

"I think he'll send for Madrigal and have it out with him."

Tim Fosgate, as he left, had an unpleasant impression that Mrs. Westervelt's nerves had turned "queer" on her, under the strain. If not, then his ears had turned queer on him for he had seemed to hear her say in a gulpy half-whisper, "Roach powder for the prince, thirteen hundred and fifty dollars" and laugh.

Presidents may be fooled, demagogues prevail or be circumvented, Lotharios mingle a dangerous potion of love and politics, and graft seek its final level, but one must, none the less, dress for dinner. Mrs. Westervelt had almost completed the process when her telephone rang. An unknown voice said:

"I am speaking for Mrs. Beryl Hartley. She would

be greatly indebted to you if you could come to the White House at once."

Edith Westervelt said decisively. "Tell Mrs. Hartley that it is impossible."

"What?" The voice seemed incredulous, concerned.

"Sorry. Quite impossible."

"Wait, please. Hold the wire. . . ." A very agitated voice was substituted at the White House end. "This Mrs. Westervelt? . . . This is Mrs. Hartley, the President's niece. . . . Yes. . . . Won't you *please* come here at once? I wouldn't ask you only I—I don't know what to do." There was a suggestion of a sob in the voice.

"Is the President ill?" asked Edith quickly.

"No. But—I can't do anything with him. I've never seen him like this before. He'll listen to you. Oh, for God's sake, hurry."

"I'll come," said Edith Westervelt.

CHAPTER XXI

STANDARDS

PRESIDENTS are people. They possess, though they must seldom yield to, the same frailties as folk of common clay. When the suppression is released, the results are likely to be startling. Upon a certain spot on the red carpet of a White House room a president once squirmed and thrashed and squealed and heel-hammered in an ecstasy of hysterical fury like a green-sick schoolgirl, because a Senator contravened his wishes. Again, a few yards away, an ex-president who had forced himself upon the then president, was reduced to such a paralysis of rage by the cool-toned utterance of a set formula, that he was stricken motionless and speechless and had to be helped from the place, lest apoplexy fell him in his tracks. In that same room Willis Markham exhibited those symptoms of nerves too long on edge, which had terrified his niece into her desperate appeal to Edith Westervelt.

The outbreak had followed the President's reading of the Forrest letter. He had at once summoned Charles Madrigal from the hospital base where he was industriously cultivating his graft. Alarmed at the tone of his pal's message, Madrigal had undertaken to report within the hour. Willis Markham had then sent for Mrs. Hartley and commanded her, in a tone which was new in her experience of him, never to speak

to Madrigal again. Her plea that he give Charley a chance had precipitated the tempest, appalling in so easy-natured a man.

She had run away from it, to her own apartment. There Charley Madrigal had found her, seeking her out before he answered the presidential summons. Anxious-faced he inquired:

"What's up with Old Bill?"

"I don't know. He wants to see you."

"What's it all about? Give a fellow a tip, Duchess."

"Tim Fosgate came here and they had a talk. Uncle Willis went right up in the air. It was awful."

"Tim? What would he be making trouble for?"

"I don't know, Charley. Uncle Willis told me if I ever saw you or spoke to you again he'd turn me out of the White House. Please don't stay, Charley. I'm so scared."

Mr. Madrigal looked as if he shared this natural weakness, but presently mustered up courage to say: "Where is he?"

"In the Red Room. Do be careful, Charley. He's turribly worked up."

Close upon Madrigal's exit, Mrs. Westervelt was shown in. Mrs. Hartley became appropriately elegant in her demeanor. "I hope you will pardon me for this intrusion upon your privacy, deah Mrs. Westervelt," she began and stopped, with a lump in her throat when the caller said with quiet directness:

"You're frightened. What is it? If I can help you, I will."

Beryl Hartley began to sob. "He talked to me perfectly awful. I've never been talked to so in my life.

Not even my husband. And I haven't done anything. It ain't *like* Uncle Willis to act so. He's always been so *sweet*. I don't know what on earth——"

"What is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to go to him. He'll listen to you. You can do anything with him."

"But what am I to say? I must have some clue."

"Just calm him down. Get him to be reasonable."

"It is the letter, I suppose."

"I don't know anything about any letter. . . . Now that you speak of it, he did have a letter in his hand when he picked on me about Charley—Mr. Madrigal—but I don't know what was in it."

"Where is he?"

"In the Red Room. Mr. Madrigal was there but I guess he's left."

"Does he expect me?"

"I told him you were coming to see me. He'll want to see you. Go right in."

"Wouldn't it be better for you to tell him first?"

Mrs. Hartley's plump figure fairly jellied with the violence of her negation. "I wouldn't dare go near him. It's the second door on this side of the hall."

Edith Westervelt walked down the passage. The door of the room was half open. She knocked. There was no response; nor was there to her second knock. She walked in. Against the wall a big, fat, jauntily attired man was jammed in the deadly clutch of another and older man. His hands clawed at the air. His face was already purpling. He made no sound, for his breath was cut off by the grip on his throat. The other man shook him from side to side and spoke in gasps of broken fury.

"You yellow dog! You grafting crook! You've

double-crossed me—once—too often. I've got—you—where I want you—now."

Edith Westervelt crossed the room swiftly. She tugged sharply at the arm. It was like iron. He shook off her grasp, not even glancing at her in the intensity of his rage. For the moment she almost relinquished the attempt. Something in her of the primitive woman responded to the brutal sincerity of that assault. Here for once she had seen Willis Markham in an access of reality, being himself and not the puppet of others. But Willis Markham was President of the United States. One cannot stand by and see the head of the nation commit a murder, however justified.

"*Willis!*" she said.

He turned, relaxed his hold, stared at her.

"Edith!"

"You're killing him."

"Was I?" he muttered. Then, "He had it coming to him."

Madrigal remained splayed against the wall like a transfixed beetle. He began to gulp.

"Have you a flask?" she asked Markham.

He went to a cabinet, opened it and brought whisky. He seemed still in a daze; his eyes followed her in a sort of dim wonder. She rubbed the liquor upon the victim's working throat and presently got him to swallow some. After a moment he spoke weakly, pleadingly:

"I can explain it all, Bill. Gimme a chance to——"

"Get out!"

"Won'cha even——"

"Get *out!*"

With a groan Madrigal lurched from the royal quarters where, as he had been wont to boast, he was as

much at home as in his own apartment. There was despair in his face, for he knew that he would never again enter there.

"Are you sane again?" Edith asked the President.

"Yes. How did you get here?"

"Mrs. Hartley sent for me. She was afraid."

"Of course. I had forgotten. Poor Burrl! I expect I was pretty rough with her."

"Was the letter true in what it said about Mr. Madrigal and Secretary Gandy?"

"Yes, and then some."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. I'll have to talk to Dan."

"But Mr. Lurcock is the one who told you that he had investigated and found everything right in Mr. Madrigal's department," she cried.

"Yes; they must have fooled Dan, too," he reflected vaguely.

She gave an exclamation of impatience and disgust. "It is 'Dan' who has fooled you. Will nothing open your eyes to what these men are doing to you?"

"No, not Dan," he protested. "A man's got to have confidence in his friends or—or where would he be?" . . .

"But a man must first know who his friends are."

His manner changed and warmed. "Well, you are, aren't you?" He caught her hand and drew her to him, tried to take her into his arms.

"I'm afraid not, Willis."

"Not even my *friend?*" he cried incredulous and reproachful.

"You broke your word to me."

"How?"

She would not even answer that palpable play for

time: "I can't give friendship where I have no faith."

"About Gandy? You think I double-crossed you. I didn't, Edith. All I said was that it would be all right about Gandy. It would have been, too, except for this Forrest mix-up. We'll pull him out yet."

"Secretary Gandy doesn't matter. It's you that matters."

"I meant to play square," he persisted. "They've been gyping me—fooling me, I mean. You were right and I was wrong. I admit it. There! You can't ask more than that, can you?"

She stared in amazed incomprehension at his smile, hopeful, conciliatory, ingratiating. Could the easy standards of politics have so drugged his perceptions that his conscience was anæsthetized against broken pledges, forfeited honor?

"I don't ask anything," she replied sadly.

He released her hand. "Oh, Edith! Don't be sore. I've got trouble enough without your turning on me."

"I'm not sore. I'm disillusioned."

Some accent of finality in the words, more than the words themselves, terrified him. "You don't mean this is the end?"

"How can it be anything else?"

"Good God! Why should it be?"

"Because we never in the world could understand each other. We don't speak the same language. We don't even see life the same. . . . I'm sorry, Willis."

"Sorry! You can't quit me this way. Why Edith, I've never lost a friend in my life, let alone. . . . There must be some way in which. . . ." He caught at her hand again, babbling uncompleted sentences of protest, entreaty.

She looked at him in silence, without rancor, almost

impersonally, and he had a sudden, withered clairvoyance of how he might seem in her eyes, obtuse, dissolute, cheap, more than a little vulgar, a contemner of the laws of the land, in statesmanship a nullity, in politics a trickster, by his own choice and taste the boon companion of tainted men instead of an associate of the world's leaders. He said, with a depth of defensive sincerity:

"I'm not like that, Edith. I'm not what you think I am."

He followed her into the hall, still pleading. There the appalled elevator man overheard that which was beyond the belief of his simple, loyal, and worshipful soul. He heard a woman say to the President of the United States—*to the President of the United States*—as cool and easy as you might pass the time of day with the postman:

"It's no use, Willis. I don't want to see you again."

He ran the elevator down at speed, did the elevator man. He was eager to rid the building of that blasphemous presence before the skies should crash down and involve the innocent with the guilty in their righteous vengeance.

CHAPTER XXII

RUMBLINGS

Council of war was in session at the Crow's Nest. Besides the regulars there was present Senator Peter Thorne. This was, in itself, testimony to the gravity of the occasion. Politicians in serious trouble were likely to call upon the experienced Senator when other helpers failed. Not that Peter Thorne was specially kindly. But he was singularly astute.

Through the clouds of tobacco smoke that overhung the conference, the name of Welling percolated in varied accents of gloom, foreboding, and acrimony. Something incredible had happened in the secret places of the Senate. Incredible and formidable. Instead of dying peacefully in the committee to which it had been referred for the purpose of "running it up the lane," Welling's motion for investigation was showing signs of life. Two committee members had, it was reported, quietly changed their attitude. Others would probably follow. In that case the motion would be reported out of the committee and the fight would be carried to the floor where any new "dirt" that Welling might have would be spread upon the public records. To make matters worse, neither Jeff Sims nor Secretary Gandy, the two general channels of information, had been able to ascertain the reason for the change. Obviously, Senator Welling had been able to bring new

arguments to bear upon his colleagues. New arguments meant new evidence. But what?

"The way I figure it out is this," announced Dan Lurcock. "Welling has been to three or four of the wobbly-kneed fellows on the Committee and scared 'em."

"What with?" growled Gandy. "What did he have?"

Charley Madrigal's formula, "You tell me and I'll tell you," insinuated itself into Lurcock's troubled mind as singularly appropriate to the occasion, but he refrained from employing it. "It might be bluff or it might not," he opined.

"He'd have to have something to bluff on," put in Tim Fosgate.

"Well, he's got nothing on me," asserted Gandy in virtuous, but too-nervous disclaimer.

"He's got something on somebody. That's a pipe," said Sig McBride.

"There's more to the thing than that," amended Lurcock. "There's the way he's handling it. He's not telling all he knows or more would have leaked through to us."

"That is my opinion also," agreed Senator Thorne. "Senator Welling is in possession of new evidence, or perhaps only rumor which he interprets as evidence. With this as a weapon he goes to his committee and says, 'Unless my motion is reported out I shall cite before the Senate certain facts so sensational that an investigation will be forced, by this or another committee.'"

"You've got a notion what those facts might be, haven't you, Senator?" came the quiet, rich-toned voice of Fosgate.

"I have heard, though not from any one here pres-

ent," answered Peter Thorne blandly, "that there was a letter recently transmitted to the President, dealing with certain sales in the Department of Public Health."

Gandy glowered. How many people, he wondered, knew about that letter. And how long would his official position be tenable if many more people knew of it?

"That's right," confirmed Lurcock. "What of it?"

"Has it occurred to any of you gentlemen that if the late Mr. Forrest could write one letter he could also write two?"

Four glasses on the table leapt, and a fifth toppled and smashed, as Dan Lurcock's fist crashed down. "That's it, by God! He's spilled to Welling."

"It's at least a working hypothesis," said the Senator.

"It's a cinch," said the gloomy Gandy.

"By the way," said Thorne with his naïve and malicious smile, "as this is just among friends, who did kill young Forrest?"

Dan Lurcock shuddered and glanced over his shoulder. He had not spent a night in the place, since the sight of blotched, crimson maculations on the white tile of the bathroom had bespattered the very texture of his mind, so that he could not rid his sleep of them. "That's no way to talk, Senator," he protested.

"Very well. Mere idle curiosity on my part. We have to consider now how deep the investigation is likely to go."

"Welling is sore as a bear with a scalded tail," put in Timothy Fosgate. "He's going to carry it to Dan before he gets through, and right up to the President if he can."

"A deplorable ambition," remarked the Senator, "and one which, as good party men, we must certainly

thwart. As well as to save the skins of some among us," he added gently. "Madrigal is, I take it, a cooked goose."

"Absolutely," stated Lurcock.

Then, since you have been kind enough to ask my advice, I would suggest Mr. Madrigal as your burnt offering."

"Talk United States," growled Gandy.

Peter Thorne put aside his air of languid indifference and spoke with vigor. "Welling can't get his investigation going for two or three months. Let the Department of Justice rush the case against Madrigal. That forestalls the investigation. He pleads guilty and exonerates Secretary Gandy and all others from any complicity, thus leaving our friend Welling rather up in the air, as I see it. Forrest's letter is conclusive as regards Madrigal, but proves nothing against the Department except perhaps a too trustful spirit in giving him his head."

"That's all very well," commented Sig McBride. "But, goldarn it, will Madrigal stand for it?"

Lurcock's face was ugly. "He'll stand for it, all right."

"That being the case"—Senator Peter Thorne rose—"I leave the affair in the competent hands of you gentlemen. If I might offer one item of unsolicited advice before leaving, it is that hereafter you practice a lee-tle more finesse in your—er—politics-financial operations. I bid you good day."

The Hon. Anderson Gandy looked about him for sympathy. "He's a superior son-of-a-bitch. ain't he?" he remarked plaintively.

"He's got the right idea, anyway," asserverated Lurcock. "Now beat it, you fellows. I'm going to put

Madrigal on the carpet. Tim, you stay. I may need you."

Summoned in the imperative mood Charley Madrigal presently appeared. He was pasty, puffy, sour of mouth and eye, but still invincibly jaunty. Lurcock did not even respond to his greeting, but snapped out:

"Where do you get off now?"

This gave an opening for the favorite Madrigal patter. "You tell me and I'll tell you."

"I'll tell you, all right, all right!" Lurcock leaned forward, a thick hand cupped over each thick knee, his manner that of the police official's third degree. "You're going over the jumps."

The idol of a thousand department clerks reached for a half-drained glass of Scotch. Lurcock knocked it from his hand so sharply that it shattered against the wall. Madrigal, stupefied, looked at the fragments. "Hey!" he protested, his pulpy mouth quivering.

"That's where you're going."

The other plucked up sufficient defiant courage to threaten: "If I go, I'll take some folks with me."

"You'll go alone. With your tongue between your teeth."

"How do you get that way?"

"Look these items over." The other handed him a neatly prepared list with statements and two columns of figures.

"They can't prove all that on me," quavered the accused.

"Every damn thing and more."

"What's this last column of figures?"

"Penalties for each operation, reckoned in years. Foots up to better'n a hundred and twenty, don't it?"

"That all?" chirped Madrigal with recovered and determined bravado. "I could do it on my head."

"That's what you'll do, son, if you don't come clean."

"How do you mean, come clean?"

"Plead guilty and take your medicine."

"Try and make me!"

"Well, of course, if you'd rather get a hundred years than two."

"I'll see you all in— What's that about two? Two years?" Mr. Madrigal was startled into new attention.

"That or thereabouts," returned Lurcock carelessly.

"Now you're spilling another kind of tune. Where does the discount come in?"

"I'll tell you, if you're ready to be reasonable."

"Try me," offered Madrigal.

"Somebody's got to be the goat," explained Lurcock. "Welling's got it on you. You're elected anyway; so you may as well go through with it. Now the Department of Justice will jump in ahead of Welling and indict you on one of the minor counts. See? You plead guilty. You take the stand and swear it was all your own scheme: nobody else knew anything about it: you played a lone hand. We'll rush the thing through and you'll get off with a light sentence. Then, when it's all blown over the other indictments will be quashed."

Madrigal's face became heavy with thought. Through his thinking ran the alluring picture of little Zoa as she sat, of mornings, demure and business-like at her desk; as she welcomed him of evenings, no longer demure nor business-like, to their sweet, secret meetings in the Nth Street apartment. Two years away from Zoa! No, by God!

"Why do I have to be the goat?" he whined resentfully. "There's others got as much out of it as I did."

Lurcock's eyes bored into him. "Because you've been a god-damned hog and a god-damned fool," he pointed out. "You've ditched your own game. You've let us all in and now you're going to let us out if you know what's good for you."

Madrigal's sense of justice approved this reasoning. If Lurcock, sitting in judgment, had condemned him for grafting, he would have resented it. They were all grafting, so why should he be picked out for punishment? But he had committed the cardinal sin of being found out. He had grafted foolishly, recklessly, stupidly. He could see that now. Zoa had warned him. He ought to have taken her tip. Well, he had something coming to him, all right. He'd go through with it, but his fast-working mind descried a way out which would not entail even the temporary sacrifice of Zoa.

"I've got a better scheme than that," said he craftily.

"Nothing doing! I'm letting you down too damn easy as it is."

"But, listen, Dan——"

"You'll take your medicine or——"

"Give him a chance, Dan," put in Tim Fosgate.

"Here's the idea," propounded Madrigal. "I'll be the goat. I'll plead guilty, all right. Anything you say. Take it all on myself. You get the trial postponed and make my bail light. Then you fellows put up the cash for me. You can afford to do that, if I let you all out in my testimony and give you a clean bill of

health. I'll make a quiet getaway, out of the country. Maybe Sig would take us—me—on a little trip to South America on his yacht. And that'll be the end of Madrigal."

Lurcock seemed favorably impressed. He felt sure that he could make Gandy put up the bail. "What do you think, Tim?" he asked.

Fosgate shook his head. "It won't do."

"Why not?" demanded its proponent. "It'll all be forgotten in six months if I'm out of the way."

"Before six months Welling will have his investigation going and nobody can tell what he'll turn up."

"But he can go on with the investigation, even if you jug me."

"Who'll care?" said Lurcock. "With you in jail, justice is satisfied, and the wind is out of his sails. Tim is right. The public has got to have a goat. You're elected goat."

"Make it one year, then," pleaded Madrigal, depressed and desperate. Surely Zoa would wait a year for him: be true to him that long. Even if she weren't, he could get her back, on his release. His standards were not finicky. One didn't expect too much of women. "A year's a hell of a while," he whined.

"Two is the least I can figure," returned Lurcock. "You ought to get twenty just for being such a boob, the way you handled the stuff. . . . Wait, I've got an idea. We'll make it a five year sentence instead of two."

'That's a hell of an idea," whimpered Madrigal.

"There'll be kicks and criticism if we let you off too light. Five'll satisfy everybody. Give the public time to forget it, while you're sojourning among the bootleggers in Atlanta—they tell me they have swell times

there—and in a year we'll slip over a quiet little executive pardon."

Madrigal's eyes brightened, then darkened again. "Bill won't stand for it. He's awful sore on me."

"Can you blame him?"

"He didn't expect me to live on my salary, did he?" the other defended himself.

"Bill will forget his grouch," prophesied Lurcock with affectionate contempt. "He never sticks to anything very long."

"Except his friends," amended Tim Fosgate. "Better than they stick to him."

"I didn't mean to make any trouble for Old Bill," asserted the discovered grafter: "and I don't want to now. Nor for anybody else. I guess it's up to me to be a sport and take my medicine."

"Now you're talkin'," Lurcock approved.

"Only," pursued the other, and paused, his eyes fixed on Lurcock.

"Spit it," snapped that gentleman.

"Only, if there's any double-crossing——"

"When did you ever know me to double-cross any one?"

"Or if you get careless and forget about me—" Another pause.

"Well?"

"Remember I've got the stuff about that little oil deal. And it isn't dynamite; it's T. N. T., that stuff."

Dan Lurcock's face was dark with flush of black blood. "I'll remember," said he. "Now get out."

"What's the oil business?" asked Fosgate when the door had closed upon Madrigal's swinging shoulders. "Something on you?"

After some hesitation, Lurcock returned an affirmative. They had not let Fosgate in on the secret of Section Sixty-five. He was apt to turn queer on deals of that sort. "That guy's a squealer," he added, jerking his head toward the door whence Madrigal had departed.

"Will Bill pardon him, do you think?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

"How's that?'

"I'm going to see that he's safe," announced Lurcock. "No Atlanta for him. There's too much chance to talk."

"What are you going to do with him, then?"

"I'm going to put him where the dogs won't bite him, and he won't bark at them. I've got no use for a squealer."

Tim Fosgate poured himself out a modest drink of which he took one swallow. "Where the dogs won't bite him," he repeated. "Like Duke Forrest?" he queried gently.

Lurcock shot a glance backward and upward over his shoulder, as if a ghost had been summoned by that simple question. "For crise-sake, Tim! You don't think I had any hand in that."

"But you would have in this."

"Not the same thing," returned the big man, shuddering. "He'll go to one of the small, close prisons, Corcoransville, maybe, where there won't anybody see him, and his correspondence will be censored—by me. By the time he's out of there, he'll be ready to be good, maybe."

"Rough stuff, Dan."

"I hate the guts of a squealer, Tim."

Fosgate finished his drink. "Dan?"

"Well"?

"That oil deal; he hasn't got anything on Old Bill, has he?"

"He's got enough to stir up a hell of a stink."

"Let him rot," said Fosgate.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PATSY

TRIAL followed upon indictment with exemplary speed in the case of Charles M. Madrigal. At first the newspapers played it up. The prisoner's prominence in a certain set, the semi-scandal of his intimacy at the White House and, above all, the expectation that a larger pattern of graft might unfold itself behind his plea of guilty, stimulated interest. But it soon appeared that little was to be hoped in the way of sensation. By his own confession, Madrigal had played an individual game, his superiors had been ignorant of his operations, his subordinates had merely carried out his orders. Forrest, who could have illuminated so much, was safely dead. Three or four contractors and jobbers had quietly slipped out of the country. Both prosecution and defense, working in predetermined accord, knew where to tread lightly and where to bear heavily. Every step in the procedure was calculated to take the wind out of Welling's sails and either block or forestall his potential exposures. Congressional investigations live and flourish, not on fact and evidence, but mainly on the sensational interest of the scandal-hungry public. The Madrigal trial undermined and staled that interest.

The prisoner at the bar was sentenced to ten years in a federal penitentiary.

Everybody was satisfied. The newspapers applauded

the swift retribution of justice. The public comfortably believed that it was being adequately protected against graft. The President felt that a traitor to the administration had got what was coming to him. Secretary Gandy slept easier, and Dan Lurcock took an extra drink or two, celebrating a plan carried through without a hitch. Even Madrigal was philosophically content. At first the severity of the sentence had startled him; it was double the stipulation. But it was pointed out to him that the public demand for a scapegoat would be the better appeased: that people would promptly forget, and that the pardon would presently be forthcoming with less fuss than if the original sentence had been open to criticism on the score of leniency. Bail was doubled, and supplied by the obliging Sig McBride, and, with three days of grace, the convicted man prepared to retire from society.

That evening, after some hours of work, destroying papers, he went late to Zoa Farley's apartment. There was a pang at his heart, for he was crazy about his little Zoa, and those would be weary months in which he could no longer see her. As he discreetly but somewhat laboriously climbed the stairs, he pictured her as she was wont to receive him. She would be lying on the divan in the luxurious little front room, at ease in some fluffy, frilly, loose, soft-pink stuff, and she would lift to him the veiled, heavy-lidded smile of her eyes, not speaking until she was in his arms. Then she would go to the ice-box with that lazy, weary grace of hers, and mix them a drink. Thus it had been for many secret nights in the immediate past: thus it would be on many secret nights in the not very distant future. Perhaps not in Washington. Better go somewhere else, until the little trouble he was in had been

forgotten. New York, maybe, or Paris. Zoa would love Paris. He hardly regretted the rupture of his relations with Beryl Hartley—for, not having heard from her, he assumed that she had broken with him—when he thought of Zoa. If it meant giving up the girl, he'd never want to marry Beryl anyway. He'd marry Zoa, as soon as he could get his divorce: that's what he'd do. He'd tell her so to-night: that would be an added incentive to keep her faithful until his return.

He opened the door and a white and tragic Zoa ran to him and clutched him.

"What's wrong, sweetie?"

"Oh, Cholly: I've just heard——"

"What? The ten years?" He laughed reassuringly, drawing her close to him. "I thought you understood. That's all right."

"It isn't! It isn't!"

"Cheer up, chickie! I'll be back with you in less than a year. Six months, maybe. Will you wait for me, honey?"

"You won't be—back—at all," she sobbed.

"*What!* What's this?"

"That's what they say at the Department of Justice."

"Who says so?"

"It's the talk. I've got a friend there. A girl. She told me."

Madrigal's face clouded. He knew how much wholly irresponsible gossip went on in the departments. But he also knew that strange bits of authentic information sometimes gained currency among the lesser employees; keyhole observation; fragments of correspondence pieced together into an interpretable whole; waif ends of conversation overheard and reported in the

talk-fests at lunch time or after hours. There had been a time when the chance remark of a stenographer to her lover had all but overturned an administration.

"Tell me what you heard, Zoa."

"This girl says—it's the inside talk—that they're going to put you away—and—and you'll die there. They think you know too much."

"Do the saps think I wouldn't make a holler?" said he savagely.

"Who'll you make it to?"

"I guess there's plenty of people to make it to."

"You can't get to them. They're going to shut you off alone by yourself until you d-d-die."

"Incommunicado, huh? I've heard it's been done. There was that feller, McAnders— Listen, girlie, are they watching you?"

"Only when you come here. You—you can't stay here to-night, Cholly."

"Can't I! You watch me."

She went to the window. "There's probably a man outside."

"What do you care?"

"I don't care, if you don't," she yielded. "I expect they know about us, anyway."

"There isn't much those guys don't know. I'll grant 'em that. You could get away to Baltimore without being trailed, couldn't you?"

"With you?"

"No, no! Alone."

"Oh! Yes. I guess so."

"That's all right, then. You've got the key to the safety deposit vault over there."

"Yes."

"You remember, I told you they'd never dare put

anything over on me, because there was too much T. N. T. in what I knew.

"Yes, Cholly."

"Well, here's where I block their little trick, if they're trying one on. Are you game to sit up all night, sweetie?"

"*All* night?" she pouted.

"Well—say half the night. I've got some stuff to dictate. Your extra machine is here, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Put on five carbons."

"They won't be very plain, the last two."

"They won't have to be," was the grim reply. "The fellows that get this stuff, their eyes'll pop out so far when they read it they'll brush against the page. So'll yours."

Madrigal's estimate of the sensational quality of the letters which he dictated was not exaggerated. There were exhaustive references to the document which she had taken from his dictation, several months earlier and deposited in the strong box in Baltimore; also the key to the numbers under which the various persons mentioned had been masked. As the typist, working at top speed, took them down—No. 1 Daniel Lurcock: No. 4 Charles M. Madrigal: No. 13 Anderson Gandy: No. 7, the Secretary of the Navy: No. 10, the President of the United States: No. 5, Mrs. Beryl Hartley, and so on—her clever fingers trembled and missed, her breath came in little gasps of astonishment, fear, and excitement. The whole story of the oil deal was catalogued there even to the näive monologue of the dapper officer of marines.

"That's what we were doing in Texas," she said, enlightened.

"That's it."

"What'll this do to the President?"

"Nothing much. Only impeach him."

"My God! I'll say it's T. N. T. How are you going to spill it?"

"If they double-cross me, you're going to spill it."

"Me? God, Cholly: I'm scared! Who to?"

"I'm coming to that now. Get out five of our official envelopes. Mark 'em with my stamp, and put 'Personal' on each one. Address them, 'The President'—I don't think it'll ever get to him—'The Secretary of State,' 'The Secretary of the Treasury,' and 'The Secretary of Commerce.' I'll keep the other one."

"Who's that for?"

"For my own use."

"I'll bet it's for that fat Hartley woman," said the girl jealously.

"Well, it is, if you want to know. I'm going to play every card I've got. It'll go to her to-morrow."

(It did go and was returned, unopened, to the sender. That avenue was closed.)

"Do the other ones go to-morrow, too?"

"They *do* not. You take them to Baltimore and put them in deposit. Here's another, for Gandy."

This one was shorter. It detailed briefly what the writer knew, and was prepared to reveal about his chief, unless he was "taken care of."

"Keep that one in the office. Now, get this right, kid, for the whole thing depends on you."

"I'll do the best I can, Cholly."

"I know you will. You're game and you're wise. I'm banking on you."

"Shall I take down what you want me to do?"

"No. It's simple enough. They've promised me—

Lurcock and the crowd—that if I'd be the goat and take my medicine, they'd fix up the pardon, and make Atlanta nothing but a six months' vacation. I'd join the Bootleggers Club and have a swell time. Why, I expect you could come down to see me, and we'd have a motor trip over some week-end."

"That'd be swell, Cholly."

"Now, if that's the ticket, I'll have all the privileges. I can write you and you can write me. So here's the test. If the story you got from the Department is right, they'll clam me up, first thing. If you don't hear from me within three days after I leave, or if you don't get word from me every week after that, take that letter to Gandy and tell him he's got to come through."

"Will he do it?"

"He will if he knows what's good for him."

"And if he turns me down?"

"Then spring the big sensation. Get the letters out of hock and send them by special messenger."

"Hadn't you better have one more copy?"

"What for?'

"Welling."

Again he sunk himself in reflection. "All right. But don't use that except as the very last thing." He gave a curt, barking laugh: "You'll see fireworks enough from the others. So'll Bill Markham, though he may not know what it's all about unless he gets my letter." His face softened. "Not that I've got anything against Bill. He handled me pretty rough—God, he's strong when he gets started! I don't blame him for being sore. . . . That dirty pup, Forrest! . . . Bill's a good scout. I don't want to make any trouble

for him, if he'll come through and get me out of this mess. But I'm not going to be the patsy for that gang of his. . . . Come on, sweetie; let's forget it. We haven't got much more time together."

Rumors reached the newspaper offices, some days later, that a federal prisoner put up a fight at the station when he discovered that he was being sent, not to Atlanta, but westward; and that, though he was officially called Clark, he was actually Charles M. Madrigal. As the reports could not be substantiated, they were never printed, and Zoa Farley did not hear of the incident.

Nor did she hear from her lover. With growing anxiety she waited through the three days' period. The six letters she had locked up in the Baltimore bank; the one to Secretary Gandy she kept in the office safe. When the fourth morning brought no word from Madrigal, she got into her car and drove to the Department of Public Health. Privately she had determined to deliver the message from her own hands into those of Dr. Gandy, even if she had to wait half the day to see him. To her surprise, she was at once admitted to his private office.

Gandy looked sick, shaken, beset. His face had a bilious hue; he was drawing jerkily at a cigar that had no light.

"Cholly's sent word to him direct and he's scared pink," thought Cholly's girl. Aloud she said: "I've got a letter for you, Mr. Secretary."

It seemed to her that he looked at her with surprise. "Who's it from?" he asked.

"Mr. Madrigal."

His eyes blinked. "M-M-Madrigal?"

"Yes." She held it out to him but his hand, after

lifting to receive it, sank back, inert. "I want you to tell me where he is," she said earnestly.

"Don't you know?"

"No."

"I thought that's why you were here," he mumbled.

"Why what? Where is he?"

"He's dead," he whispered.

"Dead? Cholly Madrigal? *Dead?*"

"He tried to make a get-away from the automobile when they were taking him to Corcoransville, and the guards shot him."

She seemed to be musing. "You're sure he's dead?" she said with such quiet insistence that he thought the shock had been too much for her comprehension.

"Instantly killed."

She screamed once, *"Cholly!"* then stared at the Secretary of Public Health as if astounded that he should have made such an outcry. "Which is the way out?" she asked.

"Here! Wait! Where are you going?"

"Me? I'm going to Baltimore," said Zoa thickly.

CHAPTER XXIV

MARKHAM LUCK

INSIGNIFICANT and pensive, Timothy Fosgate trotted up the White House steps and was accosted by the major domo with his shrewd, handsome face and his air of being a monk-of-the-world.

"He's waiting for you in the Blue Room."

"Anything wrong, Ellis?" asked the visitor with concern.

Wise in the ways of Presidents, the official hesitated. "He didn't sleep much last night."

"Not sick?"

"His nerves are edgy."

"Is it the Madrigal business?"

The other's expression was one of distaste. "He thought a lot of that graf—fellow. I never could see why. But I don't think it's that, entirely. There's something stirring in the Cabinet. He'll probably tell you—if he knows."

Fosgate found Willis Markham dictating letters. His eyes were filmy. His lips worked with nervous irritation. The stenographer was sent out at once.

"What the hell is going on, Tim?"

"I don't know what you mean, Chief."

"I mean Sheldon."

"What about Sheldon?"

"Wants to quit."

"What! Resign from the Cabinet?"

"That's it."

"What's the idea?"

"I wish you'd tell me."

"Doesn't he give any reason?"

"Private interests," minced the other in angry mimicry of the Secretary of State's old maidish manner, "imperatively require his attention."

Fosgate took off his tinted glasses and rubbed them. His lustrous gaze became thoughtful, measuring results and influences. "Well, it might be worse," was his opinion.

"It is. Covert and Maxson are quitting, too. What do you make of that?"

"Something has happened."

"Hell, Tim! Do I have to get you to tell me that? *What's* happened? That's what I want to find out."

"Doesn't Dan know?"

"I think Dan knows more than he tells." Face and voice became piteous as he added: "Since Charley Madrigal crossed me I don't know who I can trust. Sometimes I'm not even sure of you."

"Well, that's all right, Bill," returned his friend comfortably. "I wonder if this move has any connection with Madrigal's death. They couldn't think—you don't reckon they suspect——"

"That I had a hand in it? God! They couldn't. Why, Tim, I loved that boy. I wouldn't have believed in a thousand years that he'd have turned on me. He sent me a letter, or left it to be sent to me. It came the day before they took him away to begin his sentence."

"Did he expect you to go to the front for him?"

Willis Markham shook a melancholy head. "I don't

know what he expected. I sent the letter back, unopened. I was sore."

"You had a right to be sore."

The President of the United States still clung to friendly memories. "Yet he was a good fellow, Tim. Nobody could ask for better company than Charley."

"What about his death, Chief?"

"It was all straight enough. He'd been drinking all the way out. I sent him a couple of quarts of rye on the quiet; knew he'd be needing it, poor devil." He made the admission, shame-faced for his act of kindliness. "He had some of his own, too, I guess. When they got into the automobile he made some excuse about being sick to get out of the car, and tried to make a getaway into the woods. They had to shoot, then."

"Bill, I'm sorry you didn't read that letter. It might have had some clue in it."

"To the Cabinet business, do you mean?"

"Yes. And there's more than that. Welling has some new stuff for his investigation."

"I thought that was dead."

"It's been dead on its feet all the way. Now it's alive again. There's certainly something stirring."

"But Charley took his medicine. Why should he give up anything to Welling?"

Fosgate pondered. "I thought he was booked for Atlanta."

"Why, that's so. He was. Wonder how he got shifted to Corcoransville."

"Chief, I hate to ask, but—has he got anything on you?"

"How would he have anything on me?" returned the President of the United States indignantly.

"Then it must be fresh stuff on Gandy."

"Tim, do you think Andy's been taking graft since he's been in my Cabinet?"

"With both hands."

"Well, good God! Haven't I got any friends I can trust?"

Timothy Fosgate delivered a sad word of wisdom. "Chief, a President can't afford friends."

Edith Westervelt had told him much the same thing, he recalled. "I suppose you expect me to believe that you're going back on me, Tim," said he in affectionate derision.

"Oh! Me. I'm not looking for anything from you."

No; nor had Edith been. She wanted nothing that he could give, and he had been so willing to give everything. Perhaps, like Tim, she would have been a true friend to him if she had judged him worth it. She had seen the peril and falsity of his position, had warned him of it, and he had not believed her. Simp that he was! Boob! Sap! Bonehead! The very men who were now threatening to abandon him, who gave character, stability, the confidence of the people to his administration, were those whom she had urged him to make his political intimates, instead of Lurcock, Gandy, Madrigal.

"What about Andy resigning?" queried Fosgate. "Think that would do any good?"

"Under fire? I couldn't ask him to do it."

"The hell of it is—oh, well!"

"Go on, Tim. Let's have it."

"If they get Andy it'll be a bad slam for you. You took the responsibility for everything he's done in that endorsement of yours."

"That damned statement! I wish to God I'd never listened to Dan. You don't know what that statement cost me, boy." He groaned aloud, thinking of Edith Westervelt and all that she might have been to him. If only he had been guided by her, played fair and open with her. "I must have been crazy. But, at that, I only backed him in the transfer transactions, and Charley Madrigal has assumed the guilt for those."

"Ye-es. And Madrigal is dead. And Forrest is dead. And God knows what Welling has got up his sleeve."

As a matter of fact, Senator Welling had, at the moment, very little up his sleeve. But he possessed the politician's sixth sense of what is in the air. Phases of the Madrigal trial, cleverly though it had been conducted to cover all trails but one, had suggested hopeful courses of procedure, and the final tragedy had set his suspicions quivering like a cat's whiskers in the dark. Following that, he had received a typewritten, unsigned letter suggesting that he look into the activities of a squad of marines sent down into Texas, and see if he could not trace the course of their operations through a certain quiet house on Blue Street to a much larger house on Pennsylvania Avenue. When he learned of Secretary Sheldon's projected resignation he felt sure that there was precious ore close beneath the surface of the administration map, if he could but find the right place to dig.

A week earlier, he would have judged it futile to push his committee to the investigation in the face of the apathy of a public sated with the retribution upon Charles Madrigal. Now, however, there was a sensation in prospect compared to which the conviction of a Madrigal or the exposure of a Cabinet officer was

picayune. He sped up his prefatory work. It was this which caused Tim Fosgate's misgivings.

Zoa Farley had sent the anonymous letter to Welling. Madrigal's own communication to him she had saved. Her shrewd political instinct told her that it was better held in reserve for the present. But her feline fury over the death of her lover, her animal lust for vengeance, demanded some vent. Gandy was already fixed, or would be before she was through with him. He was the chief object of her hatred. But Willis Markham was in it, too, if only indirectly: he ought, by every tenet of friendship to have saved Cholly. She'd make him pay for that. There was extra satisfaction in the thought that Beryl Hartley would be involved in the coming catastrophe.

So gathered the clouds about the President's head; the attack upon his honor preparing at the hands of Senator Welling; the advertisement to the world that he ha' lost the confidence of the best element which was implied in the threatened resignations, already a matter of general rumor.

The proverbial Markham luck intervened. Sara Belle Markham quietly and suddenly died in her distant sanitarium, and the nation joined its tears to those of its beloved and pitied Chief Executive. What enemy could be so brutal, what subordinate so callous as to add persecution or complications to his grief at such a time?

CHAPTER XXV

AFTER ALL—

From the page of the newspaper before her, dazzling words leaped out to Edith Westervelt's unbelieving vision. Coupled in the enduring record of print stood the names of her dead lover and Willis Markham. "President Lauds Science Martyr" was the caption. To a scientific convention which had passed memorial resolutions to her dead, the President had, out of a clear sky, sent a letter of such just and informed estimate that her heart was warmed and melted by it. (Frothingham, the large young secretary, had spent three days gathering material and getting the letter into such shape that his Boss, for once ultracritical, would approve it). Was it a matter of chance, she wondered. Or had Willis Markham deliberately traced the identity of the man, and done this fine thing for her? It *was* a fine thing, a magnanimous thing. From her Adirondack camp she sent him a letter, simple, direct, and informed with a sweetness that he had never before found in her—for he had for once penetrated to the depths of her womanhood—thanking him and sorrowing with him in his loss.

She had a prompt reply. When was she coming back to Washington? Would she not see him? All that she had said to him before was true. He had been gulled like a hick at a circus, but that was over and done with. It might well have meant ruin to his career. Now he was going to settle down to the busi-

ness of being President. He bespoke her wisdom, her cool judgment of men, her guidance. Above all he needed her friendship and an opportunity to rehabilitate himself in her eyes. That was all he asked; all he would ask for the present. Wouldn't she give him his chance?

Softened toward him by his generous gesture, she wrote again, in friendly though indefinite manner. Until the hot season was over she would not be returning to Washington. A meeting anywhere else, while he was still in deep mourning, was naturally out of the question. She had no longer any intention of cutting him off from her friendship; what she had said in their last interview was a flash of temper and disillusion. But now, more than ever, whatever the future might develop, they must be careful of appearances. She would not put herself in a position which might occasion misunderstanding on the part of the public, nor, more important, misinterpretation on his part.

Exuberance glowed in his reply to this. Like a school boy anticipating a treat, he was full of fine promises. He would turn over a new leaf. He'd cut out booze and late hours and the whist parties; stick right there through the summer and work. He would show them that the practical politician had in him the making of the best and most efficient kind of President. He would make himself so valuable, so indispensable to the nation, that the public as well as the Party would demand him for a second term. If it should not prove so, if he had to sacrifice his ambitions to his new principles and new ideals, he would have reward enough in her approval.

It had all that naïve and self-deceiving quality which she had come to look for in his character. But she fell

far short of appreciating the significance of that word, "ideals," from him. He had perhaps never before employed it except in derision or for purely political effect.

Washington was puzzled over the new manifestation of Willis Markham. Had the President had a change of heart? Or was he "making character" against the time when he would be called upon to defend himself and his administration? Upon what charges, the Capital did not quite know, but it was understood that there was more than the half-smothered Gandy scandal. Every one knew that the President had practically stopped drinking. Every one knew that the whist parties were no longer held in the quiet nest on Blue Street. His old cronies saw little of him; all his time was devoted to work. He was beginning to grow thin and tense, and to show signs of that nervous irritancy, which, in so many of his forerunners had been the initial symptom of "White House breakdown." It was even whispered that he had broken with Dan Lurcock. This was not true. What was true, and of even greater significance, was that he was deliberately courting the conscientious (and painful) society of Secretary Sheldon, and in only lesser degree, of Secretary Maxson, who was cynically amused, and Secretary Covert who was frankly bored by this development. The Senate hierarchy opined that Bill Markham had gone over to the highbrows. Only Senator Peter Thorne knew what influence had impelled him to that strange association.

Seeking mountain coolness over a week-end, that astute statesman received a telephone message from Mrs. Westervelt. Could he run over to her camp if she sent a boat for him? Of course; at once; always at her commands.

"Tell me all about it," she invited.

"All about what?"

"Don't be stupid, Peter. Washington."

"Meaning Willis Markham?"

"Of course."

"Again I ask you: What are you going to do with him, Edith?"

"I suppose," said she reflectively, "he'll want to marry me."

"Undoubtedly. Shall you do it?"

"And save the Party? Is that your idea?"

"I think it would take more than a wedding now to save the Party from its official leader."

"Really! What is 'more than a wedding?'"

"Well, for example, a funeral."

"The honorable gentleman is pleased to be jocular."

"I assure you I am far from jocular about this."

She was impressed. "Is it really as bad as that?"

"Nobody knows how bad it is."

"Except Senator Thorne?"

He did not respond to her jibe in kind. "Not even myself. I don't know how bad it is because I don't know how soon other people will share the inside knowledge which I now have."

"And which you are about to impart to me," said she confidently.

He sighed. "I usually do. You are destruction to all discretion, Edith."

"Dear Peter! How sweet of you! But I thought our Willis had passed the danger point."

"What do you consider the danger point?"

"The threatened Cabinet resignations."

"So you know about that? Edith, you are a marvel. The danger is postponed, because of Mrs. Markham's

death. Sheldon won't affront our national sentimentality; he knows the power of the sob-sisters to stir the sloppy American soul. Therefore he gives the President three months' leeway, unless the scandal breaks out in the meantime. Covert and Maxson will hold off, also, and may even stick."

"What scandal, Peter? Is it Gandy?"

"Gandy is in it. So is Lurcock. So is the President. And also," he smiled, "your humble servitor."

"Not you, Peter. You're too shrewd."

"Why couldn't you say too upright?" he complained. "Nevertheless you behold in me a smirched character. I have been seen publicly in Washington, in the company of a fair young siren of dubious character."

"Pee-tah! Unchaperoned?"

"By no means. Mr. Daniel Lurcock was with us, if that makes it any better."

"By no means, yourself! Who was the gay lady?"

"Have you ever heard of Miss Zoa Farley?"

"Never."

"You wouldn't. She was, putting it delicately, the girl-friend of the late Charles M. Madrigal."

"I thought Mrs. Beryl Hartley held that position."

"Ah, his attentions to 'Burrl' were *pour le bon motif*, assuming that even the holy estate of matrimony could be termed a good motive in Mr. Madrigal. The little Farley girl acted also as his confidential clerk. She has in her possession letters and papers of Madrigal's. If they ever become public, the Canadian border will look like a free-for-all hurdle race, and the European liners will be swamped by eminent statesmen seeking a change of air."

She leaned forward, attentive, expectant. "What's in them, Peter?"

"I don't know."

"You haven't seen them?"

"Yes, I've seen a copy."

"Then——"

"But I didn't read it. Dan Lurcock did. He seemed impressed. I might go further and say that he seemed, for him, quite disturbed."

"Why didn't you read them?"

With an affectation of carelessness he replied: "Because the conviction is deeply rooted in my soul that the less I know about that matter at first hand, the better and happier I shall be. And," he added significantly, "perhaps the safer."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Quite, I believe."

"Do you think that she is likely to make the papers public?"

"That is the question. Negotiations are to be resumed with her in a day or two. Meantime we have reason to believe that some of the information, if not all, has already gone out."

"To whom?"

"The shrewd little Zoa did not say. Don't you consider it indicative, however, that three Cabinet members evinced an inclination to resign almost immediately after Madrigal's untimely but convenient demise?"

Edith Westervelt possessed a mind that worked quickly and in straight lines. "Then Willis is in it," she said.

"He is in danger of being in it. Very deep. But I doubt whether he knows it yet."

"But if three Cabinet officers are resigning, wouldn't they give him the reason?"

"Hardly the true reason. One doesn't say to the

President of the United States, 'I think you're a crook and I want nothing more to do with you.' Urgent private business——"

"Peter, *is* Willis Markham dishonest?"

"That is what I want you to tell me when you've learned all the facts."

"But you don't tell me any facts."

"I'm going to tell you what I can and leave you to work out the story for yourself, with Willis Markham's aid."

"I? How? Why should I?"

"Because if you have any thought of going on with him," he answered with a sudden, tense gravity, "you owe it to yourself to know where he stands. Perhaps you owe it to him, too. He *is* in love with you, Edith."

"And you think that constitutes a claim?" she murmured.

"Doesn't it—for a woman?"

"I suppose it does. And I do owe him something for a fine and generous action. Tell me what I am to do."

"It's oil," he said succinctly. "Texas Oil lands have been taken over by the Navy Department and diverted to private uses. Lurcock, Gandy, and Madrigal engineered it. Beryl Hartley is in it somewhere. I believe the President has been kept absolutely in the dark by Lurcock and the rest. If the oil income is ever traced to the White House it's all up with Willis Markham."

"Even if he is innocent?"

"Who'd believe in his innocence after his wholesale endorsement of Gandy? The public might stand for one mistake of that kind; it would never stand for two. Poor Markham! The small town politician in

the giant's robe. It isn't his fault that he brought a ward heeler's mind and a joiner's conception of politics to the biggest job in the world. He's going, blinded, into a fight for his life and he deserves something better than to be slaughtered in the dark, for he really has tried to be decent and to be President the best he knows how, since you changed his horizons for him. But there's no one to tell him."

She had a sharp, slight quiver of pity and foreboding. She looked at Thorne appealingly. "Do I have to tell him, Peter?"

"No. I can't really see that there is any obligation on you. It's at least a tenable hypothesis that he isn't worth saving. When I consider that he has been paying in thousands of dollars a month recently to clear up his stock gambling debts, I don't know that I believe so strongly in his innocence, myself."

"I do," asserted Edith Westervelt.

He concealed a smile. "You would."

"What does that mean, Peter?"

"It means, doesn't it, that you are going back to Washington?"

"Yes," said she.

CHAPTER XXVI

REALIZATION

So soon after the death of his wife, it was impossible for Edith Westervelt to receive Markham at her home. Other conventionalities she had defied, but this one she would not ignore. To see him she must go to the White House. Ostensibly she would, of course, be calling upon Mrs. Hartley. The socially excitable Beryl would, she knew, report the expected visit to her uncle, thus giving her her opportunity. She called up the mistress of the White House and, as she had expected, was flutteringly urged to come any time; that very afternoon, if she had nothing else to do.

The visitor found Mrs. Hartley in the rôle of one preyed upon by a secret grief and making the most of it. The conversation was dragged around to poor Char—Mr. Madrigal, upon whose undimmed brow the halo of martyrdom was set; the handkerchief was brought into play, pressed to the lips, then to the eyes.

"This very morning," said the mourner, brokenly, "a check came in from the oil well. The one poor Charley made the deal for. I could hardly endorse it. It's got me upset for the whole day."

Mrs. Westervelt asked after the President's health. "He's working much too hard. Much too hard. He feels his responsibilities so. But all of us must do that in a position like this," and she proceeded to ex-

patiate upon the difficulties and demands of her own lofty position.

Mrs. Westervelt had suffered from ten minutes of the Berylene conversation when Willis Markham came to the Pink Room where they sat. He was thinner, more worn, more fine drawn than before. Something of the atmosphere of geniality and super-affability had dropped from him. A warmth and a glow obliterated the weariness of the face when his eyes met hers.

Abruptly but not unkindly he said to his niece: "I want to speak with Mrs. Westervelt alone."

"But," laughingly protested the caller, in the interest of the formalities, "I came to see Mrs. Hartley."

"Later, then," he returned.

"Yes. I'll be back later; don't you ever think I won't," chirruped the arch Beryl.

Before the door had closed he walked over and took both Edith's hands. "This is good of you, Edith."

Her fingers closed upon his with a pressure that held him less than the luminous directness of her gaze. "You asked me for my friendship. I've come to prove it to you!"

"You've proved it by coming, God bless you!"

"No! It is harder than that. Willis, do you know why Secretary Sheldon intends to resign?"

His brow clouded. "He never has given a genuine reason."

"I can give it to you."

"Is that what brought you to Washington?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, then."

"A story involving your personal honor has reached him."

"Then why isn't he man enough to face me with it," he burst out, "and give me a chance to deny it?"

She plagiarized Senator Peter Thorne, smiling wanly. "One doesn't say to the President of the United States, 'Are you a crook or aren't you?' does one?"

"Who says I'm a crook?' he demanded, full-voiced and steady-eyed; and for a moment she was ashamed of her own doubts in the face of his obvious readiness to meet the challenge.

"Mr. Madrigal left some sort of statement."

"Statement? Statement?" He was still frowning. "I've heard nothing about any statement from Madrigal. Nothing has been published."

"It was not for publication."

"Then what was it for?" he asked, contemptuous and puzzled.

"For Secretaries Sheldon, Covert and Maxson. This is not certain," she added, "but it is a well-supported surmise."

He seemed struck with this. "The three that wanted to get out. Well," he added with impatience, the impatience not of alarm or misgiving but of a desire to have the issues of battle clearly defined: "What was it about, if you know?"

"Oil."

"Oil?" There was a startling change in his voice as he repeated the word. "What oil? Where?"

Years before Edith had gone to a prize-fight at the Cirque Hippique in Paris and had there seen a big man, felled by a smaller one, get to his feet only to be struck down again—and again—and again—each time struggling up more feebly, blindly, hopelessly to meet the inevitable sledge of the blow. In the deadly

process of question and answer now she was reminded of that terrible, inhuman repetition, that brutish persistent struggle against the inevitable.

"In Texas."

"Was it—was it a gusher?"

"An oil well. Yes."

"Was Madrigal in it?"

"Yes."

"Any one—any one else I know? Any one near to me?" The pallor that spread downward from that austere and noble brow had turned to a dull gray about the corners of the mouth, with lines cut through it like dried channels in the aridity of a desert. Pityingly she turned her eyes away.

"Do you want me to tell you, Willis? Do I have to tell you?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Hartley."

"I thought so."

"And Mr. Lurcock and Secretary Gandy."

"And Tim Fosgate probably."

"No. He knows nothing about it. Or he didn't when I last saw him."

"Don't tell me I've got one friend who isn't double-crossing me!" he said with concentrated bitterness.

"You have two," she answered gently, "if you will count me."

"Oh, no! Not after this. You won't have any use for me. Nobody will have any use for me. A man who grafted when he was President of the United States!" he cackled hoarsely. "I guess that's about as low as you can find 'em."

"Is that what you've done, Willis?"

"That's what they'll say of me."

"I don't care what they say of you. I care about what you've done."

His voice softened abruptly on what was nearly a sob. "Do you? Do you Edith? If that's true I can fight it out yet." The twisted and hurt lines came back into his face; the hopeless flatness into his voice. "No. It's no good. They've got it on me."

"What have they got on you?"

"Oh, only that I've been soaking away a sweet little income of four to five thousand a month from this oil property that they told me was family land; that's all," said he with desperate jauntiness. "I never asked any questions when Burrl told me about having struck oil, because—well because I suppose, deep inside, I knew all the time there was something phony about it and I didn't have the guts—excuse me, Edith——"

"Oh, for God's sake, go *on!*"

"I didn't have the nerve to follow it up. Madrigal and the others put up a game and got Burrl into it. My own niece; almost like my own daughter."

"You didn't know?" she asked, white-lipped.

"I don't know now. What excuse is that? I ought to have known."

"There is more to tell. Something about the Government having taken over the land."

"That doesn't ring any bell. But I'll find out. By God, I'll find out." He pushed a button, then ran to the desk phone. "Get me Dan Lurcock," he snapped into the phone, "and have him here quick." To the servant he said: "I want Mrs. Hartley here at once."

In a varied life Edith Westervelt had never known anything like the twenty minutes talk that followed between the President, his chief adviser, and his niece. Only upon his urgency had she remained. She sat

silent, a heart-wrung witness to Willis Markham's despair, Beryl Hartley's terrified sobbing, and Daniel Lurcock's dogged defense, as the dismal, absurd, and ruinous story of the rape of Section Sixty-five unrolled itself. Time and again Lurcock answered the President's wrath with the plea:

"We did it for you, Bill. Not one of us got a nickel out of it. We thought we could get away with murder; that's all. And we'll come through yet, if you'll just keep your nerve."

After it was all over Willis Markham had a word with Edith. "That's the end of me and good-by to you," he concluded.

"Why good-by? I'm not going away for awhile."

"But you won't want to see me again."

"Do you think me so poor-spirited?"

Hope sprang to life in his eyes that had turned so lifeless. "Edith, do you care enough for that?"

"I don't believe you have done anything intentionally dishonorable."

"That isn't what I need to know. Do you care enough to—to be the wife of an ex-President?

Somewhere she drew the courage to strike down that last staggering hope with a "No."

"You're right," he said. "So, good-by."

Outside she found Daniel Lurcock waiting. He addressed her without rancor. "I've always had a hunch that you would dish us."

Abandoning the obvious retort, she asked: "What did he mean by speaking of himself as an ex-President. Is he going to resign?"

Lurcock grunted and spat. "He thinks he is. But he isn't. He'll take another think. Presidents never resign."

Though Presidents never resign, Cabinet officers sometimes do. It was the fond hope of many leading Best Minds that Secretary Gandy would take this step in the interest of the Party. The Honorable Andy disappointed them. In a precarious and unstable world he felt that the safest place for him was in the President's official family. It advertised the fact that he still enjoyed the Markham friendship; and, as every one knew, Willis Markham stood by his friends.

Dismay even more than surprise would have beset Andy Gandy's soul had he known that the ultimate determination of his fate rested not with the President but in the hands of a frail, tinted wisp of a girl in whose eyes passion had been temporarily quenched by a cool, shrewd purposefulness. Miss Zoa Farley, on a rainy night, sat with Senator Peter Thorne and the Hon. Daniel Lurcock in an obscure roadhouse, for the resumption of the pourparlers about the Madrigal papers.

"Fifty thousand dollars," said the little Zoa. It was not the first time she had said it, and it lost nothing of firmness by repetition.

"You're cuckoo!" returned Dan Lurcock angrily.

In more polished terms, Senator Thorne expressed his sense of her unreasonableness.

"It ought to be a hundred thousand," she asserted. "I'm letting you down easy."

"Ten thou' would be too much."

"To save the President? Why he'd give me a hundred grand for 'em himself."

"Try to get to him," snarled Lurcock.

"And have your secret service gunmen shoot me full of holes for a lady anarchist?" retorted the girl. "Not for little Zoa."

Back and forth they argued, Lurcock angry and threatening, Thorne suave and persuasive, the girl calmly sure of herself and her position. The Senator ordered more champagne, but little Zoa's head was of some impermeable metal; she was just as steady after the fifth glass as after the first. Senator Thorne finally put the case to her openly.

There existed a secret emergency fund of the Party maintained for the acquisition of just such memoirs as the late Mr. Charles Madrigal's. In that treasury approximately twenty thousand dollars had now accumulated. Peter Thorne was prepared to raise an additional ten thousand dollars, from his own efforts. Thirty thousand dollars in all. Miss Farley was courteously but with finality invited to take it or leave it. Miss Farley was shrewd. She perceived that this was, indeed, the limit. She took it.

"And if you double-cross us now," said Dan Lurcock savagely, "God help you! You'll be croaked before you're a month older."

"That'll be all right," said little Zoa unperturbed. "You needn't worry about me, old dears. I'm taking a trip to Europe for my health."

"What arrangements are to be made as to the delivery of the papers?" queried Thorne.

"You can go to the safe deposit vault with me, if you like—after I've got the cash." With lucidity she explained the situation. Three copies of Madrigal's letter had gone to the three Cabinet officers; but these were generalizations, actual proof of which was in the locked documents. "You ought to be able to shut those fellows' mouths," she opined.

"That'll be all right," said Lurcock. "But how do

we know that you aren't holding out a copy on us?"

"I am," was the composed reply.

Mr. Lurcock swore violently and regrettably. "Be yourself," Miss Farley reproved him. "Cut out the rough talk."

"But, my dear young lady," protested Senator Thorne, "you must see that as long as one of these documents remains in existence the others are of no value. As it is we are trusting broadly to your good faith."

"I'll say you are," she agreed, "because you have to. But you can have the other one after Gandy has resigned."

"Who told you Gandy was going to resign?" demanded Lurcock.

"I'm telling you." Her heavy-lidded eyes became hot and stary. "I'm going to get that dirty crook. He's the man that railroaded my Cholly and I'm going to get him."

Vainly the other two argued. Zoa Farley's vengeful little soul of a cat was set upon this. Gandy had taken a "cut" of every deal that Cholly had put through, then when trouble came, because Cholly knew too much, he'd put him away. She wouldn't be surprised if he'd croaked him at that. Gandy had to get out or the whole deal was off. She was quite prepared to sacrifice the thirty thousand dollars and her own safety to the only justice to her dead lover which her mind could conceive. And she held the cards.

The other two withdrew for conference. Zoa finished the bottle. When they came back, they agreed to her terms.

In the following week Doctor Anderson Gandy surprised all and gratified many by resigning as Secretary

of the Department of Public Health. His failing health was given as the reason.

A month later Miss Zoa Farley sailed for Europe, although her name appeared on no passenger list. There was, however, a pretty and painted and pert Mrs. J. K. Smith on one of the French liners, who strongly resembled Miss Farley and who was supposed by her fellow passengers to be the bride of a middle aged and alleged J. K. Smith of Detroit.

Dan Lurcock had the Madrigal documents and was reasonably content. He would have been less so had he known that Zoa Farley, before sailing with his thirty thousand dollars, had spent a long and laborious evening very privately with Senator Welling.

She proposed to have her money and her revenge also. It was her last act of fidelity to Charles M. Madrigal.

CHAPTER XXVII

DEBACLE

THAT last infirmity of mighty houses, a "To Let" sign, blazoned forth the decadence of the cottage on Blue Street. Behind its closed shutters, Dan Lurcock and Jeff Sims held converse. Lurcock had aged ten years in the six months since Duke Forrest's death started that rolling rock which had brought ruin to so many hopeful plans, and scandal upon so many gainful careers. Just back from a western trip, he was picking his factotum's receptive but stodgy brains for up-to-date news and gossip of Washington's prevailing topic.

"When does the investigation resume?"

"Tuesday."

"Are they going to call me?"

"Looks that way."

"What's Welling's line?"

"I guess there's no doubt he's gunning for the Old Man," replied Jeff Sims in a hushed voice.

"Oil?" asked Lurcock fearfully.

"I reckon so."

"Have they brought out anything about the Clairborne deal?"

"Nope. Got kinda close to it once or twice and then Welling bows off."

"That's bad. That's *bad*. He's saving it. Jim Clairborne 'll have to stand by when the time comes."

"Jim's gone to Europe."

"Kay-ryste! That Iliad Oil Company feller, have they got hold of him?"

"On his way to Peru."

"It's a flight."

"It's a panic."

"Gandy gone yet?"

"Sick in bed. Doctor's certificate. They'll never get him on the stand."

"Sig McBride?"

"Private hospital. Nervous prostration."

"They're a gutless bunch."

"Sig testified he'd lent Gandy the ninety grand and when they checked up on him he weakened and said he hadn't. Scared pink for fear they'll indict him."

"Perjured himself like a goddam fool," growled Lurcock, slightly modifying a classic formula. "Have they got to the Attorney-General?"

"Nope. They say his turn's coming."

"What's *his* next move?" asked the contemptuous Lurcock. "Greenland or China or the Walter Reed Hospital?"

"They say he's been throwin' epileptic spasms all over the place, but he hasn't resigned and they say he won't. That funny lad at the British Embassy made one of his wise-cracks about his bein' an example of the survival of the fit. I don't get it, do you?"

"No. Yes," returned the other absently. He came out of his abstraction to say, "I wish I knew what Welling's got up his sleeve. You say whenever anything comes up about oil, he bows off?"

"Yep."

"Looks as though the Farley girl had spilled some of her stuff to him."

"Who's that? Charley Madrigal's girl? You know what's become of her don't you?"

"In Europe?"

"That's right. Trailin' around the Riviera with a guy that calls himself Smith. I understand his real name's Pelchek and he comes from Detroit."

"Pelchek?" Lurcock taxed his memory for a moment. "I know him. He was in one of the last sales deals with Madrigal and cleaned up on it. Quite a pal of Madrigal's."

"And she teams up with him before her boy friend is dead a month," commented Mr. Jeff Sims, shocked. "The dirty little hoor."

Lurcock was more philosophical; perhaps more humanitarian. "Oh, I don't know. A girl's got to live. But if she has double-crossed us with Welling, it's good night nurse for some of us."

"Say, Dan." His fidus Achates presently broke in upon meditations, which, to judge from their accompanying expression, were far from cheerful.

"What do you want?"

"There's Russia," suggested Jeff Sims diffidently.

"What about Russia?"

"They tell me there's pickin's there."

"What of it?"

"Whaddayasay you and me take a run across and look at things?"

"Not by a goddam sight," retorted the fighter. "There's no yellow on my belly."

"We ain't doin' any good here," complained the

other. "There ain't a hundred dollars come in to the place since you left."

"No. And it'll be a hell of a while before any more comes in. That graft's played out, boy."

"Then what's the good of sticking around here? It ain't very safe."

"Nobody's going to have a chance to say Dan Lurcock was run out of the country. Besides, there's Old Bill."

"You can't do Bill any good now."

"Can't I? Suppose Welling is on the trail of the oil deal."

"Well, if he is I don't see that a——"

"Don't you, you fat sap! Don't you see Bill will need some friend that's wise, to stand by him? Why, Christ! those wolves would tear him to pieces if he had to fight 'em single handed."

"I don't see what you could do," persisted Jeff.

The light of a fanatic devotion glowed upon Lurcock's heavy face. "I'd go through for him. That's what I'd do," he half whispered.

"What, take the whole load?"

"Why not?"

"It'd be the hoose-gow for you."

Lurcock disregarded this. "Why, he'd have resigned before now if it hadn't been for me. Where would that have left us all? They'd be picking his bones by now, and ours too."

"Have you seen him since you got back?"

"Jeff, I went to the White House to-day and got the air," answered the other in a grievous voice. "What do you think of that?"

"Jeest!" was what the scandalized Mr. Sims thought of that.

"They gave me the busy sign," he pursued. "If Old Bill is off me— Oh, well, he'll get over it. . . . I'm going to smell around the Hill a bit and see what's on."

The Welling Committee investigation had started slowly, amidst the belittling jeers of the "loyal" press. But presently the wide-flung net began to bring in fish, small, at first, then larger and larger. Neither guilt nor innocence is safe from this kind of inquiry, since it has few rules and no bounds. Public apathy had turned to interest and warmed to indignation as prominent name after prominent name was involved; Gandy, Clairborne, McBride, Loomis, Lurcock and the dead Madrigal, chosen crony of the President of the United States. Evidently Senator Welling was being guided by inside information. How far it might lead him, who might eventually be involved, what unrevealed deals and scandals might yet be brought to light to compromise honor in high places, nobody knew, for the chief inquisitor and his aides were keeping their own counsel. But President Markham's name was in the air. Mostly it was spoken in whispers. This is a bad sign.

Meantime the immediate situation was improved. In the face of a probable attack on its leader, the Party closed its ranks. There was no longer any talk of resignations from the Cabinet. Gandy was already out; that there would be criminal action against him was regarded as certain. Equally certain was it that at least three and possibly four other Cabinet members would resign as soon as they could do so without the appearance of desertion. For the time, they were, of

necessity, making a virtue of loyalty, and standing by the harassed President.

"Everything depends on whether Welling has got his hooks into the oil deal," Senator Peter Thorne told the enquiring Lurcock. "If he has——"

"Impeachment, huh?" grunted Lurcock.

"I don't know how it could be stopped."

"Everything at the Texas end has been covered up. Same in Oklahoma. Some of the records, I understand, have unfortunately disappeared."

"That *is* unfortunate," conceded the Senator with a twinkle in his still brilliant eyes. "By the way, you've just returned from that section, haven't you?"

"Yes. Private business called me down there."

"Then that'll be all right."

"It'll be as all right as the fear of God and some well-distributed political promises can make it."

"You made some reference in our talk with the fascinating Miss Farley to the activities of a squad of marines."

"Yes. What of it?"

"One of Welling's investigators has been digging into the Navy Department records."

"He won't find much."

"Not, perhaps, the name of the officer in command?"

Lurcock grinned. "That gentleman is somewhere in the Philippines."

"However, there is wireless if the Committee should need his testimony."

"Not where he is. He is on a long exploration among the remote islets of the group."

"Nothing like doing a thing thoroughly while you're doing it," approved the Senator. "We'll save the bacon yet."

"Can we save the President?" asked Lurcock anxiously. "Can he be renominated?"

Thorne shook his head. "Not a chance of it, I'm afraid."

"Why not?" demanded the other in a tone of angry challenge.

"That Gandy endorsement. Welling keeps hammering at that on every occasion. It's Markham that he's after. If Gandy is tried and convicted the President will be in the position of having approved criminal acts. Almost an accomplice."

"Then we'll hold Gandy's trial off. Hell! Bill's got a year and a half to go yet. People will forget. They'll forget anything, just give 'em time. Then we'll start a country-wide publicity campaign to build up his popularity again. If we can put over a conviction on Welling, everything his Committee has done will be discounted."

"You can't. That case will be dropped."

"Scared out, huh?" snorted the other. "Just like old Hambone unless I'm there all the time to stiffen his spine. I stand by Bill. We can put him over yet. Why, Senator, it would break that boy's heart if they turned him down for the renomination," he concluded with profound feeling.

But on this point Senator Thorne was immovable. "He'll be lucky to come through with his shirt," he stated with colloquial emphasis.

Pensive but not dispirited, the scarred battler of many political free-for-alls returned to the Crow's Nest to be welcomed by glorious news from the lips of Jeff Sims.

"Who d'yeh think called up, Dan?"

"Dunno. Spit it."

"The Old Man."

"What, *Bill?*" The tired face lighted. "Then he isn't off me."

"I should say *not*. And what d'yeh think he wants?"

"A little game?" asked the other hopefully.

"You win. For to-night. He says can you dig one up and for God's sake, forget politics and give him a chance to get his mind off his troubles."

"Sure, we can get one up. The old crowd—" He stopped and swallowed hard. "You can play, Jeff."

"Me? Hell! I ain't got the bean to sit in with you guys. Cassino, yes. But poker,—you'd strip me."

"Well, we can get Tim. And Senator Guy. And me; that's three. Wonder if Peter Thorne wouldn't sit in. He's a good guy when you get through his crust. Ziegler's over from New York. That's five. Bill likes six in the game."

Jeff's fat forehead was puckered in thought. "Let's see. Who could we get. Seem's though there must be some reg'lar feller we haven't thought of. How about Sig McBride?"

"Thought he was in the hospital."

"Hell! He's on the hospital *records*. I'll get him." Suddenly Mr. Sims jellied his abdominal curve with a resounding whack upon his own thigh. "Say! Dan! D'yeh know who we haven't counted? *Bill!* What d'yeh know about that!"

Both men burst into a thunder of mirth. They laughed and laughed and laughed. It was not so much the absurdity of forgetting Bill, as it was the release and relief of spirit in the prospect of renewing the kindly fellowship on the old basis.

"Get Sig anyway," gasped Dan at length, wiping his eyes.

"Seven's a better game than six," confirmed Jeff.

"We'll make it a party."

"You said it. We'll make it a party."

CHAPTER XXVIII

REVELRY

It was a party.

All seven had come. Sig McBride had not only defied his doctor's (and lawyer's) orders; he had brought from his own genuine pre-war cellar supplies of various precious and inspiring liquids. They were more than welcome; they were needed to maintain the requisite pitch of gayety in that house of revelry and memory.

The President was his own easy, careless, cheery, genial, boy-hearted self of earlier days. The life of the party! Luck followed him. By the time the stupid looking woman had come in at the call of "All stretch," with sandwiches, thick and meaty, and juleps, the mint fresh from Potomac-side, he was more than seven hundred dollars to the good.

"I haven't had an evening like this since God knows when," he sighed with deep content over the glass which the dumb-appearing "Aunt Sue" had, with her own diligent hands, frosted for him.

"Let's make it an all-nighter," suggested McBride.

"You haven't got seven visiting delegations, a factional fight, and an international congress on your hands to-morrow, Sig," returned the Nation's Chief Executive. "I'll stretch it and play till three."

"Round o' roodles at three?" asked Secretary Guy, comparatively infrequent in the game.

"And consolation," said Tim Fosgate.

Guy was sitting in the chair formerly occupied by Charley Madrigal, who always insisted that playing with your back to a window brought luck. Tim Fosgate had Forrest's old seat. He was not superstitious. Willis Markham, once more "Old Bill," sat opposite Guy, with Fosgate on one side and Lurcock on the other, next to whom sat Senator Thorne. Ziegler, the New York man, was on Guy's left, with McBride for his other neighbor.

After the luncheon the game slowed down, though the drinks went fast. Tim Fosgate had a guardian eye upon the Chief, knowing that he had been "off it" for some weeks, and fearful of the effect of a too enthusiastic resumption.

"Pass."

"Pass."

"Open it, Ziegler?" Lurcock with typical impatience was doing the prompting.

"Who? Me? Hell! I ain't seen a pair for an hour."

"How about you, Sig? What's the matter with this game? Everybody asleep?"

"I can't get a goldarned thing to draw to."

"By me."

"Nothing stirring."

"The cards are jinxed."

"By me."

"Can't open it."

"What's the matter with the rotten game?" demanded Lurcock irritably. "The damn cards are hoodooed."

"There goes your luck, Dan," sniggered McBride. "Curse the cards and they'll curse you."

"Everybody else's luck has gone with it," said Tim Fosgate. "Hey! Rastus! Bring two fresh packs."

"Yassuh."

"And a couple more bottles of Scotch," suggested Markham.

"Yassuh, Mist' Markham, suh."

"Who's the Jonah?" asked Guy.

"Tim's got the Jonah seat," answered Lurcock.

"How's that?" asked Ziegler, new to the game and its peculiar history.

Under the sudden, disconcerted stare of three pairs of startled eyes, Lurcock lost his heavy composure. *He* wasn't going to tell 'em that Duke Forrest who used to sit there was a by-word for bad luck. He wished he'd kept his fool trap shut. Fosgate, who had hastily gathered his cards from the new deal, said with bravado, "I'll show you whether it's a Jonah or not. She's open for——"

A shattering report cut him off, such a report as might have been made by a revolver shot, pressed close against a man's head in an adjoining room.

The President half got to his feet, then sat down again, under the gentle pressure of Tim's hand on his shoulder, the reassurance of Tim's quiet, rich voice in his ear.

"Steady, Chief, steady!"

"What was——"

Dan Lurcock's lower lip drooped and leaked over the uncompleted question. His eyes glared at the swinging door. McBride's stare and Markham's followed.

Fosgate stepped to the other door. "Anything wrong, boys?" he asked of the Secret Service men on guard.

"Bad news," came the response after a moment. "Mr. McBride's car, back in the alley, has blown out a rear tire."

"Christ!" said Dan Lurcock. "Gimme a drink."

The tempo of the game quickened after the interruption. It seemed as if the luck changed also. This is a phenomenon familiar to all poker players. The hands ran bigger certainly, but this was because every man tried to get into and stay in every pot. The betting was sharp, quick, explosive. Drinks were in constant demand. They played now with the intensity of nervous strain seeking release.

For half an hour the pace kept up. Then the President, sitting next the dealer with two pairs, said:

"Crack it."

"In," answered Lurcock.

"Stay," from Thorne.

Guy and Ziegler tossed in their chips with a rattle, followed by McBride. Fosgate was out. Markham drew and filled his hand.

"Guess these are worth twenty," he announced moderately, to draw the others in.

Lurcock tossed his cards to the center. Thorne stayed, McBride dropped, out of turn. Guy raised. Ziegler studied his hand.

"I don't remember how many cards you drew," he remarked to Guy.

"Don't you? You ought to keep your ears open."

"Aw, it's a friendly game," protested the New Yorker.

"If it comes to that," grinned the other, "I didn't notice what you drew."

"Ask the dealer."

"The dealer's deaf and dumb after the draw is closed," correctly stated the President, smiling.

"It's even-Steven, then," argued Ziegler.

"All right." Guy leaned back in the lucky chair of dead Charley Madrigal. "I'll make you a proposition. You tell me and I'll tell you."

There followed a brief, sick silence. The President of the United States let his cards drop on the table. "What was that you said?" he asked in a trance-like monotone.

"You tell me and I'll tell you." The innocent, ghastly echo seemed to hover in the air. "What's the matter with that?"

Markham pushed himself backward and up to his feet, his hands splayed on the table. "I think—I'll be —going home, gentlemen," he said in a thin, dismayed voice.

"Not feeling sick, are you, Mr. President?" queried Ziegler, solicitous.

"Aren't you going to play out the hand?" said Guy.

"I drop," answered the President.

"Aw, Bill, you wouldn't let a little thing like that bust up the game," protested Sig McBride.

"Shut up, you fool!" snapped Lurcock.

"Sorry, boys," said the President of the United States with an effort to keep his voice steady, "but I've got to be going."

"I'll go with you, Chief."

"All right, Tim, boy. Good night, you fellows." His voice trailed away. He leaned on Fosgate's shoulder as they went out to join the attendant guards.

Sig McBride shook his head. "Bill ain't what he used to be."

"What's the matter?" asked Secretary Guy. "Was it something I did? He looked at me like I was a ghost."

"It was the same wisecrack that Charley Madrigal was always making," explained the millionaire.

"The one that was croaked, trying to make his get-away?" queried Ziegler with lively interest. He spread out Willis Markham's abandoned cards, disclosing three eights and two aces. "Heres' a coincidence, gents. How many cards did he take?"

"One."

"Then," announced Ziegler, triumphantly, "he drew to aces and eights, the Dead-Man's-Hand."

"Forget it, damn you!" shouted Lurcock.

Out in the night, Willis Markham clutched the arm of his companion. "Walk me, Tim," he said.

"Don't you think you ought to get back to bed?"

"What's the use? I can't sleep. I haven't had a decent night's sleep for weeks. . . . And to-night!"

"Get the doctor to give you something. You'll crack."

"Oh, I've got some tablets he gave me. If you call that sleep."

They walked in a companioned silence of foreboding, Fosgate steady and solicitous, his companion twitchy and occasionally muttering.

"Forget it, Bill," counseled the friend at last. "It don't mean anything."

"No. . . . No, I guess it don't. It gave me a bad jar, Tim, boy."

"That'll be all right in the morning."

Another long silence. Then, "Tim, it's no good."

"What's no good?"

"Anything. I've lost my taste for life."

"Oh, that's because you got an upset. You'll be——"

"No. It was before that. Before the—the damned tire went off, too."

"Why, you were having a whale of a time, Chief. The boys were so tickled to see you. Just like old times."

"I thought it was going to be, but it wasn't. There wasn't any *feel* to it. There isn't any feel to anything any more. Except liquor. Come on and we'll have a drink."

"I'll come in if you want me, but I don't want the drink."

"You mean you don't want me to have any more."

"Well, if you're going to take that sleep dope it might be dangerous."

"All right, Tim. No call for me to spoil your beauty sleep. I'll send you home in the car, boy. Don't you worry. I'll pass up the night-cap and go right to bed."

Warned by the White House physician to be sparing in the use of the sedative, Markham gallantly tried to get to sleep without it. Every nerve twitched. Well, he could stand that—for a while. But noises, he couldn't stand those; queer noises inside his ears. Of course they must be inside. Echoes of what had happened that evening. The voices of companions whom he had loved, and loved no more, crossing in the banal patter of the game. Cut short by the shock of a report that silenced them momentarily. Then the lingo of the betting again. And then, brisk and clear and jaunty from the dead man's chair, the dead man's formula:

"You tell me and I'll tell you."

No! That he could not endure. He felt his way

to the bathroom, groped for and found the cabinet. The small phial of pellets was on the second shelf. One was the dose, but one hadn't been effective the past week. He'd take two. He'd got to sleep. He gulped them down with water, replacing the container. On second thought he took it out again, carrying it back to his room with him and setting it on his night stand between lamp fixture and telephone. If the two pellets weren't enough to turn the trick he'd take a third later.

He stretched himself quietly on the bed, closing his eyes. There was no relief from the nerve-rack. Well, he'd wait awhile. He waited. Something began to burn at the pit of his stomach. Queer. He had never felt that before. A pang ran through him. It was severe enough to startle him. A wave of nausea set him to retching. Then the second fiery thrill scorched him. He reached for the telephone. His hand encountered the electric apparatus. He switched on the light. The first object his eyes fell upon was the bottle from which he had taken the pellets.

It was the dark blue poison phial, the gift of Edith Westervelt's one surrender to him.

Through the telephone he said, "Send the doctor up to me, please," and a startled voice answered, "Right away, Mr. President."

He had two minutes to think before the physician arrived. He had taken poison, not of his own volition. A deadly poison unless antidotes were administered. He knew all about it, for he had looked it up after that talk with Edith, morbidly torturing himself with the thought of her sweet body in the processes of a slow dissolution. In the case she had told him of, he recalled, the physicians had been deceived. The poison

was painful, though not unendurable at first, and afterward a slow and almost painless death. . . .

A slow and almost painless death. There was relief, balm, that hope of rest for which he had been vainly and unconsciously seeking, in the memory of her calm-voiced words. Why not? The easiest way. The only way out of it all. And there was a sweetness in knowing that the end to his troubles would come through Edith's yielding of her own impulse. Between the next two onsets of pain he struggled to the bathroom and replaced the poison.

To the doctor he said, 'Sorry to get you up, old man. I've got a little stomach attack. Must have eaten something that went wrong."

Examination upon this simple announcement disclosed nothing alarming. The physician gave an opiate and sat about until his patient fell asleep. Willis Markham's last waking thought was the memory of something said to him by Edith. When there was no other way out, death was always a door.

For him there was no other way out.

CHAPTER XXIX

A TIME FOR ALL GOOD MEN

FASHIONABLE visitors are so rare in summer that M. Jarry made a personal fuss over Mrs. Westervelt and Senator Thorne, when they sought refuge against the heat of the afternoon in the comparative comfort of his shaded terrasse. He had the tact to compliment Madame, not upon her beauty, but upon the flawless coolness and freshness which made her superior to conditions. His polite reference to M. le Senateur's devotion to duty was less well received. M. le Senateur was seriously bored with a protracted session which interfered with his social plans. It was a time, however, when nobody knew what might happen from day to day, and all good men were expected to come to the aid of the party when, as, and if required.

"The epidemic spreads," he observed over his tumbler of iced tea.

"The plague of politics?" asked Edith languidly.

"It's known as the Welling disease. Some go to bed, some go to hospital, some go abroad. The President is the latest victim."

"Is he ill?"

"So the papers say. Suffering from a slight indisposition. Advised to keep his bed for a few days. Wonder what new trail to the White House Welling has struck."

"Sometimes you are unnecessarily cynical, Peter."

"Very likely. Summer in Washington is my excuse."

"Do you really think Willis is afraid?"

"He's strained and anxious. Who wouldn't be in his place?"

"*You* don't feel any symptoms coming on, do you, Peter?"

"Not I! I have a conscience clear as a dewdrop," he declared virtuously. "In this affair," he added.

"Whatever it may be as regards certain past performances?"

"Politics are politics," said Senator Peter Thorne.

"Peter, why don't I resent these things in you?" she asked, her pensive eyes fixed upon the handsome and urbane old face.

"What things?"

"Political corruption."

He smiled. "Libel, my dear. Gross libel. For which I could call down the rigors of the law upon you."

"Political cynicism, then. Why do I complacently accept in you an attitude which I would not endure in Willis Markham? Is it because he is President?"

Peter Thorne's face became both grave and sad. "It's more personal than that. It's because, in your heart, you've never identified yourself with me, even potentially."

"And I have with Willis?"

"I think so."

"I think so, too. Oh, well, that's all over. And yet I shrink from thinking of him as involved in crookedness and chicanery. It isn't morality on my part, or even ethics. It's a feeling that I don't like to think of him as soiled."

"I'd give ten years of life that I can ill afford," he returned with forced lightness, "to have you feel that way toward me."

"Perhaps I've known you too long, and become too used to you." Edith gazed down the sun-smitten street. "The Crow's Nest shows signs of activity," she commented.

"Yes. It came to life night before last."

"A whist party?"

"Exactly."

"Was the President there?"

"He was."

"I thought—" she began, and checked her reflection. "You're sure, I suppose."

"Quite. I also was among those present."

"The social tone of the place is improving. I should think there might have been a touch of the macabre about that game."

"We were visited by a couple of ghosts," he confessed, "one of which broke up the game. Your friend Markham seemed to take it quite to heart."

"Tell me, Peetah dear."

"No coaxing is necessary. The game had got under way. There was quite a little hard liquor going——"

"Was Willis drinking?"

He gazed at her interestedly before replying, "Pretty consistently, even for him. The alleged reformation did not last long. Too gay a dog to break old habits. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Go on."

But the Senator's eyes were now fixed upon the doorway down the street. A compact group of men was on the steps of the cottage, their heads close to-

gether. "Something is in the air," he observed. "The crows are in caucus."

The group broke. Some went inside. Daniel Lurcock walked up the street, crossing to the side where they sat. His usual confident slouch was gone. He moved like a broken man, his spine sagging, his head low-hung. One glimpse of his face they had; it was flabby, loose, swollen.

"He looks as if he had been crying," said Edith, startled.

"Something has gone very wrong," opined the Senator.

"Perhaps they've turned up something against him and he's frightened."

"Dan Lurcock was never afraid of anything in his life."

"Dan! *Dan!* Wait a minute. Dan!" The frog-like boom of the call filled the street, as Jeff Sims paddled along the sidewalk, bellowing as he ran. His eyes were wild, and his face splotched. The bigger man stopped until he was overtaken; then the pair went on, arm in arm, clinging to each other.

"Do you want to follow, Peter? Don't mind me."

The Senatorial brow contracted into a puzzled frown. "No. I don't know what all this means, but I have a settled idea that the farther I keep away from that crew, the better it will be for the sagacious reputation of Senator Peter Thorne."

"One would say that somebody had dropped a bomb into that crow's nest," she said lightly.

"And here comes another crow."

"No, that's a seal. A very gentle and wise little seal. A friend of mine. I'm going to call him in. . . . Mr. Fosgate!"

Tim Fosgate stopped, looking about him through his tinted glasses. Edith spoke again. He located the voice.

"Did you want me?"

"Yes. Will you come in for a moment?"

She presented the two men, "Will you have a drink, Mr. Fosgate?" asked Thorne after a quick, appraising look at him.

"Thanks. Brandy, please—if it can be had."

"It can." The Senator gave the order to the waiter, adding, aside, after an unobtrusive observation of the newcomer's face, "Immediately."

"I wanted to ask you about the President," said Edith Westervelt.

"What have you heard?"

"Very little. Senator Thorne saw something in the evening paper."

Fosgate drank his brandy clear, coughing over it.

"Have you seen him?" asked Thorne.

"Yes. This morning."

"Is it anything potentially serious?"

"He's going to die," said Tim Fosgate, his voice breaking.

"What?" exclaimed the other two in common and incredulous consternation.

"They can't do anything for him." He took off his glasses. His big, brown, seal-like eyes were wet with tears.

Edith Westervelt slipped a hand over his that quivered where it lay on the table. "Tell me about it," she said. "I'm a friend of his, too."

"I know you were—" he gulped—"are. The doctors are up in the air. They can't get any clue."

"But the evening papers——"

"Nothing has been given to them. It will be given out very gradually, to avoid sudden alarm."

"To prevent Wall Street from going into a panic," interpreted Thorne for Edith's enlightenment.

"But I think that's damnable!" she cried. "Here is a man dying and the first thing they think of is the effect on stocks."

"This is a business country, my dear," the Senator reminded her.

"It may turn out that it's just as well," muttered Fosgate.

"How can it be 'just as well' to have a man like Willis Markham die?" she demanded indignantly.

"Just as well for him. There is something that Welling has been hunting for, something on the Chief, the President. It had to do with the operation of some marines in Texas. He's sent for the officer in charge, and says he'll wait a year, if necessary, to get his testimony."

Thorne said with unwonted emotion, "That means impeachment."

"So they say."

"Then perhaps he *is* lucky. The Markham luck to the last." With a sudden, sharp thought he added, "Did he know about Welling's having this clue?"

"I don't know."

"I want to know about Willis," put in Edith Westervelt impatiently. "Everything you can tell me."

"He had a stomach attack in the night. After the party at the Nest," he explained to Thorne. "The doctor diagnosed indigestion, though the pains were very sharp, almost like some corrosive drug." Edith Westervelt started. Her hand, after a spasmodic movement, was withdrawn. "The doctor got him to

sleep under opiate. In the morning the pain was gone, but he was sluggish and tired. Then they found the kidneys had stopped functioning; simply gone out of business. He's dying slowly because——"

He stopped. Edith Westervelt had grasped his hand again, this time with a desperate clutch. Her eyes were wide, her voice raw with horror.

"When did he take it?"

"Take what? It isn't any disease that he——"

"The poison. When?"

"Edith!"

"What about poison?" demanded Fosgate.

"Bichloride of mercury. It acts that way. Destroys the kidneys. He had a bottle of the tablets."

The two men had risen, were staring at her. "How do you know?"

"I know. For God's sake, *won't* you tell me when he took it?"

"Three nights ago."

"Then it's too late." She drew a long quivering sigh.

"Isn't there any antidote?"

"Yes. If they'd known in time. Not now."

"Suicide!" mumbled Tim Fosgate. "Bill Markham a suicide!"

Said Peter Thorne energetically: "It mustn't be suicide. Nobody knows but us three. Do they?" he appealed to Edith.

"No. Not unless the doctors——"

"They haven't a suspicion," said Fosgate. "They're working in the dark."

"Keep 'em there," advised Thorne grimly. "Edith, does any one but you know about this poison?"

"No. How should they?"

"Where did he keep it?"

She stared. "How should I know?"

"I'm only asking," he returned. Swiftly, practically, he interrogated Fosgate.

"Do you know the President's rooms?"

"Yes."

"Where would he be likely to keep such a thing?"

"There's a cabinet in his bathroom where he keeps a bottle of rye and a few other things. It would likely be there."

Edith caught the trend of his purpose. "It's a smallish dark blue bottle full of lighter blue pellets. You can't miss it."

"Go up there and get it and smuggle it out," directed Peter Thorne.

"It's the last thing we can do for him," added Edith.

Fosgate's plump face had withered. "I guess that's right," he said, simply, and left.

Edith Westervelt, her hand to her mouth, bent over the table, stricken.

"That is what was the matter with Lurcock and Sims," said Thorne presently.

"Yes."

"Do you realize that those hard-boiled grafters, all of them, really loved him? They worked him, but they loved him."

A sob rose in her throat. "I wish I could have."

"But you didn't?"

"No. I couldn't—quite."

"Why do you wish you could have, Edith?"

"I don't know. He was so—so lovable."

"At least," said he with a strange sort of satisfied jealousy. "I know now about you and Willis Markham."

"What do you know?"

"That he never was your lover."

"How do you arrive at that?"

"If he had been, as long as there was one chance in a million to save him, you would have declared the truth and taken that chance."

"Would I? Perhaps I would. But I think—I hope I would have been brave enough and kind enough to let him die. What is there left for him to live for?"

"There would have been you, in that case."

"No, I might have given myself to him. I could wish that I had, now. But I never would have stayed to be tainted by his disgrace."

"You are a strange woman, Edith."

"You're thinking that I'm a hard woman. Would you save him if you could?"

"No."

"Why? You don't care for him."

"I care for the Party. I care for the game, if you choose. We are going to subvert history to-day, you and little Fosgate and I, and incidentally to cheat the great, sentimental, soppy-hearted American public. In a good cause, too."

"Is it as important as that?" she marveled.

"Let me outline it to you. Death will wipe out the whole score. Not only for Willis Markham but for everybody around him. Always provided it is a martyr's death and not a suicide's. A president who commits suicide is a coward. A president who dies in office is a hero. We are adding to the ranks of the immortals."

"Don't be clever, please, Peter. I don't think I can quite bear it now."

"Not clever. Truthful. And prophetic. This is

what will happen. Vice-President Elliot, who has about as much sentiment as a cucumber, but understands well the political value of the sympathetic sob, will announce that any Cabinet good enough for his martyred predecessor is good enough for him. That saves the Cabinet situation. The Welling investigation will go on, but whenever and wherever it approaches Willis Markham, it will sheer off, leaving loose ends which nobody will be brutal enough to take up. Lurcock's activities will be forgiven because he was a friend of the martyr. Gandy's graft will be forgotten for the same reason. Free pardon for all the Crow's Nest crowd. Their graft is over, but their skins are safe. The Party is rescued on the brink of the worst scandal since Grant. And if any man does raise the voice of slander against our dead hero and martyr or any of his acts, that man shall be anathema and outcaste in the name of piety, loyalty, and one hundred per cent patriotism. Truth is mighty and may prevail. But it can no more stand up against Death than the rest of us. . . . Wait and watch and see if what I predict isn't true."

CHAPTER XXX

"EROICA."

WHEN the news was gradually allowed to filter into print that Willis Markham was gravely ill, a wave of profound and intimate emotion swept the country. The President, who was more of the people than any president since Lincoln, more simply human in his frailties and deficiencies as well as in his kindly virtues, was in danger, and the heart of America went out to him. The nation waited and feared and hoped, and ceased hoping, and wept.

Willis Markham was dying at his post, a victim of the mighty office which he had lived up to according to his dim and flickering lights. Great editors dipped their pens into sunlight, rainbow, and stardust, and lauded him as the noblest type of American statesmanship—upright, far-visioned, laborious, incorruptible, unsparing of self in his devotion to his duty. Which was largely true. It must have been true because Willis Markham, reading the tributes, quite simply and sincerely believed them.

God-fearing, truth-loving preachers drew comparisons with Washington, Lincoln, St. Paul, Socrates, and Christ. The dying man modestly deprecated these. He got more satisfaction out of the scores and finally hundreds of letters and messages that came in daily from men to whom he had been kind in that easy-hearted geniality of his, from women for whom he had

done little, unforgotten favors, from people who had discerned and admired and loved the essential sweetness and kindliness of the man beneath the politician's suave polish. These told him what he most wanted to know, that he would hold a secure, an indestructible place in the love and trust and pious memory of the millions of common, ordinary, he-man and she-woman Americans of his own kind. This was the solace, the triumph, the thrill of his last days.

It was a slow and public death-bed. Knowing what he knew, he could afford to ignore the directions of his distracted doctors and die as he chose. He elected to hold audiences to the last, his friends about him. Lurcock came daily, and sat, huddled and wretched, his face a mask of misery. Tim Fosgate lived in a room across the hall during the last few days. The Cabinet called every day, and, toward the end, "Susie" Sheldon was admitted, much to his discomfiture. The President shook hands with him.

"Well, old boy," he said in his good-fellow voice, "it wasn't your fault, I guess. And I guess it wasn't mine."

Secretary Sheldon's smile was a bit ghastly, though valorous. He had to be led down the hallway because he bumped into the furniture.

Sigmund McBride came and wept, openly and unashamed. Attorney-General Hambidge came, Senator Guy came; also Senator Thorne, Jeff Sims, and the lesser lights who occasionally graced the Crow's Nest whist parties. Anderson Gandy appeared, braving the perils of the law and the commands of his physicians, and tottered in between two attendants to shake the hand of his old friend, and speak a few well-chosen words in a shaken voice—which effort proved subse-

quently to be worth more to his cause than all the subterfuges and arguments of his high-priced lawyers.

The halo of martyrdom cast its palliating radiance upon all who had been near and dear to Willis Markham. In the soft white light that beat upon that throne, they, too, became objects of compassion and affection. The tears of the nation washed their sins away.

Welling came and was sorrowful and, by implication, apologetic, as if it were his fault. Perhaps it was.

There came, too, the Vice-President, so soon to be President, who looked inscrutably at the dying man out of his fishy eyes and assured him that the Markham policies would be faithfully adhered to. Vice-President Elliot did not know what the Markham policies were. Nor did Markham. Nor any one else. But it made a hit when sent out over the news association wires.

In an outer room the President's secretary, between sniffles, was preparing a final message to the American people from their doomed leader. It seemed to him that it should be simple and direct, and he finally had the inspiration of the succinct and sufficient phrase, so justly expressive of the creed of the man, which has gone down in history as President Markham's last words:

"Keep America on top."

Willis Markham did not send for Edith Westervelt. Some strange delicacy of spirit, perhaps a higher power of his pervading kindliness, prevented him. The flowers which she sent daily, gathered by her own hands from her conservatory, gave him his opening, but he would not take it. She telephoned to Tim Fosgate.

"Could I see him?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Now, if at all."

He met her at the White House door, took her to the sick room, got everybody else out, and himself stood looking out of the window. She went straight to the bed, pale but tearless. He smiled, murmured her name, stretched out to her a hand that was already bloodless and dank. She put it to her breast as if to warm back the waning life. He smiled and said:

"The end of a glorious career. You were onto me all the time, weren't you?"

She made a gesture of denial.

"Well, I wasn't onto myself. I guess that was the whole trouble."

"Ought you to talk?"

"What does it matter? I didn't do this on purpose, you know. Accident. Got the wrong bottle. Yours."

She thought that he was saying it to make his case better with her. "Do you think I should have blamed you if you had meant it?"

"No. Of course not. You'd understand."

She bent and kissed his lead-blue lips. "Because I love you."

Again he smiled. "Bless you for that lie. But I've loved you for the truth that is in you."

She felt the shock of a suspicion that there was in this man something rarer and finer than her self-clouded vision had ever seen. Passionately and humbly she said:

"I would have been proud to love you."

"Ah! I like that. . . . I mustn't keep you. Good-by. . . . No, not good-by. You'll come again?"

"Of course," she answered. Perhaps her smile required even more courage than his.

He lost consciousness that night. The end came in the morning. Tim Fosgate was with him, and Lurcock, and the private secretary with his last words typed and ready to give out to the newspapers.

So died a nation's hero and a martyr.

Senator Peter Thorne and Tim Fosgate went, after the funeral, to bid Edith Westervelt good-by. They sat in the conservatory with three glasses before them.

"You're not coming back, Edith?" asked the Senator.

"Never. I've had enough of Washington."

"And I," said Tim Fosgate. "I'm through."

"Not I," said Peter Thorne. "I have to stay and see what the next turn of the wheel brings."

Fosgate sighed. "There won't be much life in this administration."

In the depths of his forensic voice the other declaimed:

"They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
"The courts were Jamshyd gloried and drank deep."

"Who wrote that? Walt Mason?" asked Fosgate.

"Omar Khayyam. Ever heard of him?"

The little man's lucent eyes expressed puzzlement. "I thought Omar Khayyam was a race-horse."

Edith Westervelt lifted her glass. "Here is to bind the secret we are to keep," she said. "And to a man who did the best he could and died doing it."

"Let that be his epitaph," said Thorne. "It is good enough for any man."

They drank, standing.

Afterward they talked of that amazing career, which, with every element of failure, of frustration, of catas-

trophe inherent in it, had culminated in a tragic triumph. They sought reasons, assigned causes. It remained for Peter Thorne, wise, cynical, tolerant, to speak the final word out of the depth of his experience.

"Friendship in politics undermines more principles than fraud, and gratitude is a worse poison than graft."

THE END

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